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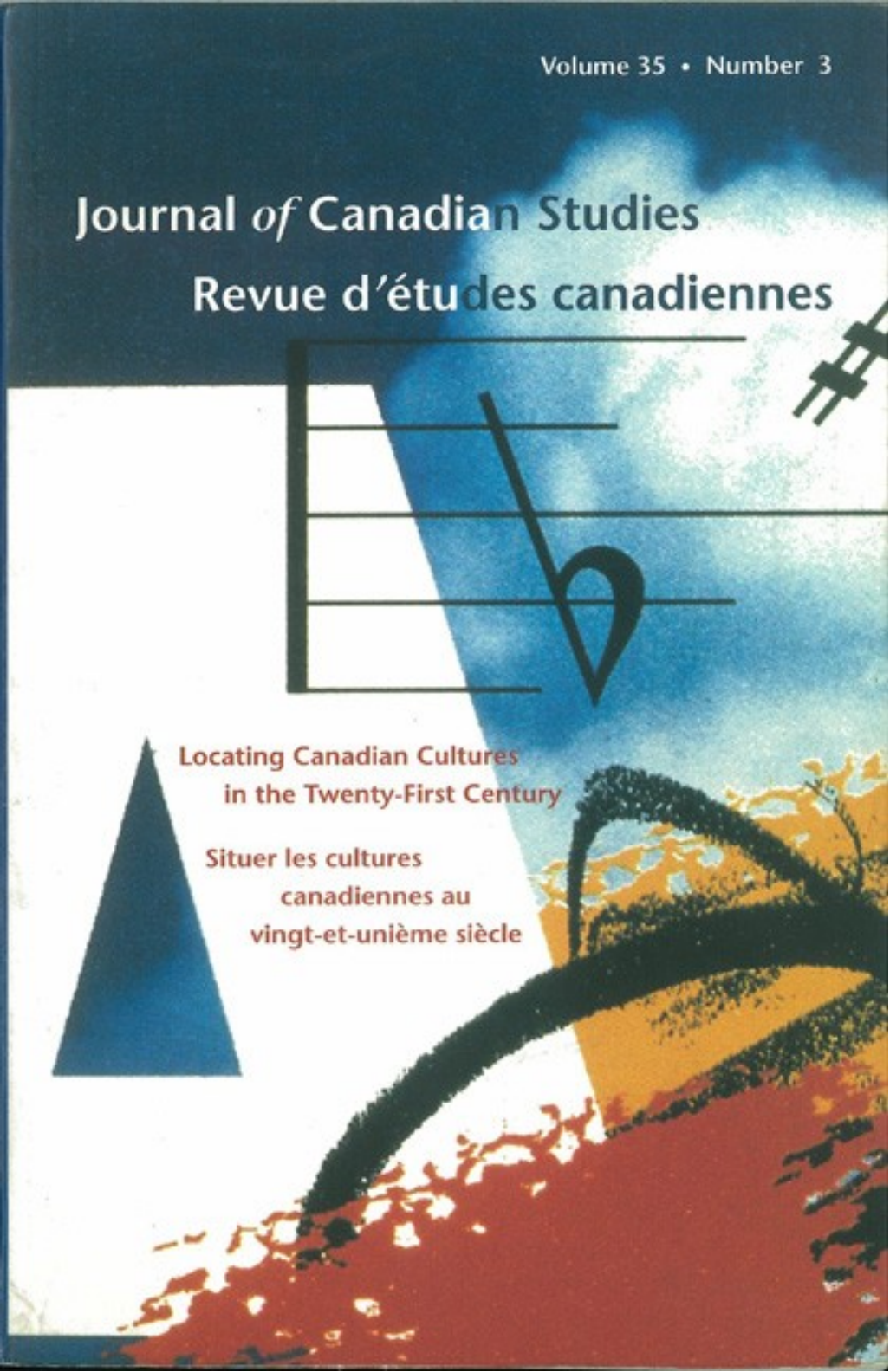

Locating Canadian Cultures in the Twenty-First Century

Situer les cultures canadiennes au vingt-et-unième siècle

Fear and Loathing on the Granting Trail: Canadian Art Versus Canadian Bureaucracy

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This essay is an exploration of the effect of arts and culture grants from various levels of the Canadian granting bureaucracy on the creative id of the Canadian artist. The article posits that the Canadian artist suffers from Arts Bureaucracy Angst, and chronicles the following evidence for this thesis: the infrequent but noticeable onset of sly artworks dealing directly with the granting bureaucracy; the general climate in which the press and government habitually attack grants as wasteful; direct testimony from artists who give evidence as to the extent to which granting ideology/issues have affected their mental and creative processes.

Cet article explore de façon concise l'effet, sur le « ça » créatif de l'artiste canadien, des subventions accordées aux arts et à la culture par les divers niveaux de la bureaucratie canadienne subventionnaire. L'auteur avance que l'artiste canadien souffre de l'angoisse de la bureaucratie artistique, et il appuie son argumentation sur les éléments suivants: l'apparition peu fréquente mais visible d'œuvres astucieuses traitant directement de la bureaucratie subventionnaire; le climat général dans lequel la presse et le gouvernement dénoncent habituellement les subventions comme étant du gaspillage; et des témoignages de la bouche même des artistes qui démontrent jusqu'où l'idéologie et les questions boursières ont influencé leurs processus mentaux et créateurs.

There's this guy who calls me every now and then, an employee of some division of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

He asks me tantalizing questions like, "Which of the new wave of independent book publishers in Canada are doing important work?" He takes note of my answers, tells me how committed the department is to supporting younger initiatives, describes his excitement at being able to help the new generation of publishers and writers. Then he goes away for three or six or ten months, resurfacing once in a while to ask me similar questions and to "update me" on the "progress"; progress that never seems to be closer or further away from the ultimate goal of "supporting" this "new" generation, many members of whom have come and gone since I first heard from "Heritage Guy," publishers who went broke or burnt out before they could fulfil the stringent requirements imposed by provincial and federal arts councils to qualify for funding.

Months after a conversation with Heritage Guy, I find myself occasionally thinking about him and the elaborate web of Canadian arts bureaucracies he emerges from. I wonder, for instance, if what I told him of the struggle endemic to

independent creation in this country made any impression at all. Would I, perhaps, affect government policy? Change the way things are? Be partly responsible for some micro-publishing unit run out of a Kensington Market basement apartment getting a cheque for two or three or, hey, dare to dream, $10,000? For a moment, I become flattered that I am the one Heritage Guy occasionally calls on when in need of advice concerning the seething undercurrents and flash floods of indie Canadian culture. I imagine a board (bored?) room in Ottawa, flow charts, spread sheets and an official report that contains, among other things, my impressive plea on behalf of the new micro-publishers of Canada, that handful of 20- and 30-something visionaries who, for better or worse, are willing to publish the books and voices no one else will.

Then I remind myself that it has been more than two years since I first heard from Heritage Guy, and nothing has been done. There have, apparently, been reports, studies, more consultations, more drafts of possible reports. This leads me to another set of speculations: that nothing will ever be done, that, consciously or not, it's all about just going through the motions, preserving the status quo, providing an image of action in the form of an endless series of consultations that will never be applied to a concerted plan for action. The Canadian arts scene is well acquainted with pretend consultation; witness the early 1990s Ontario Arts Council (OAC) survey of operations in which a right-wing consulting company hired by Mike Harris flacks set out to determine that, yes, the OAC did indeed need a substantial reorganization, including, as it turned out, a 40 per cent cut to OAC funding in the first two years of the Tories' no-sense revolution.

This leads me to my final set of day-dream contemplations, semi-regular moments of paralysis during which you might see me standing in the middle of the Eastbound 401 lanes squinting perplexedly at honking traffic on the way to the capital. In this final line of inquiry, I wonder what these art bureaucrats think they are doing to the practitioners of the arts in Canada who look to them for leadership, for funding, for hope.They ask taunting leading questions in the form of questionnaires and surveys. What do we want? More money. Who should get funding? Me! They have us fill out an endless series of forms, blank lines on which we are asked to innocently, optimistically, submit our funding requirements. They make good-willed double-speak promises, assuring us of support, of help, of new programmes and new horizons even as "they," to pick one egregious example, strike a deal that could demolish what little remains of Canada's indigenous magazine industry.

Beyond wondering who these people are and what world they live in (they're not totally alien, I've met them at conferences, spoken to them at the cocktail events, listened to them reprimand me for not signing, dating and copying in triplicate my statement of commitment to equity and equal opportunity), I wonder– in those

fleeting moments when I think of Heritage Guy and his questions – how all the grants and contests and awards and subsidies have shaped the consciousness, the *zeitgeist*, of the Canadian artist at the end of the twentieth century.

Start by imagining the bizarre minutiae of the arts bureaucracy, the world of forms and minutes and boards of directors and statements of purpose and activity reports, as a sort of conformity imposed upon the loose society of artists. Whether I'm a Native poet in the interior of British Columbia or a hipster cartoonist in downtown Montreal or a touchy-feely regional publisher in Cape Breton, when it comes to making art I share one thing with my peers across the country: the mysterious essence of the arts bureaucracy, so irrelevant, so crucial, to the possibilities of independent creative action in this country.

There is, then, a quiet undercurrent of anxiety that bonds Canada's creatives together. Call it Arts Bureaucracy Angst (ABA) and think of it as an intangible, unquantifiable factor that figures into the artistic calculations of this country, from creation to execution to public presentation. This angst isn't about whether or not arts funding is good or bad or well dispensed. What I'm talking about here should be understood as a force in artistic creation, one of the many streams that flow together to become the river that is the creative act. ABA is the unstated, unheard undercurrent of conflicting paradigms – hope and despair – by which the arts function in this country. It is the cloud under which we create. It is invisible, unnoticed, ever present. It is characterized by angst, anxiety, insecurity, resignation and, finally, defiance.

ABA may be intangible and hard to quantify, but it still occasionally rears its strange, troublesome head. Like the lake monster Ogopogo, it has been seen repeatedly, but somehow the sightings never quite get verified. For myself, I first realized I was suffering from ABA when I wrote a short story called "The Useless," part of a collection in progress. In "The Useless," a painter perched on the precipice of success begins to have grave doubts about his role in society. Tormented by the imminent election of a candidate who pledges to put "the useless" back to work, inundated with government grants and offers from prestigious gallery directors, my protagonist stops painting altogether, and his life begins to unravel:

> A representative of the Director asked me to meet him in the food court in the centre of the city.
>
> We are a country celebrated for its natural beauty.
>
> I ate with a white fork that tasted of the thin cellophane wrapping it arrived encased in. The tines bent as I scraped my polystyrene plate.
>
> The Director, began The Representative, has become ... not impatient but ... disappointed....
>
> I nodded.
>
> The tremendous opportunity, said The Representative.

You will be obligated to repay the funds, continued The Representative.

Unless, said The Representative.

The Representative showed me the papers I had signed, the grants I had received through the National Council for the Arts, the Federal Department of Heritage and History, the Provincial Division of Parks and Culture, the Municipal Bureau of Entertainment and Leisure.

Once, I drove a van, moved objects from place to place.

At night, I danced with an aerosol of spray paint in my hand.

The situation, I began to explain to The Representative.

He shrunk away.

I followed his gaze. The plastic fork in my fist.

My laughter disturbed the other diners. The Representative quickly gathered the papers I had signed once upon a time and swept them into a briefcase.

The story, which, like all my stories, comes from some primal, other, unplanned place, contains within it a palatable sense of unease – the realization that Heritage Guy and his cluster of cold office buildings dispensing complex, uncompromising forms is, after all, getting to me. Over the years, I've received funding for various arts endeavours from all levels of government (money from the Toronto Arts Council helps the festival I programme, dollops of cash from the Ontario Arts Council go to my fiction and the magazine I publish and cash from the Canada Council went towards a book-length work of cultural criticism). In fact, many of the endeavours I hope to perpetuate in this cold, empty world of economic consolidation depend on the support of the various levels of arts funding. But clearly, such dependency comes with a mental price that I've begun to pay.

I'm not the only one. If we're talking about financial unease and a vague sense of dependency, we can look at the work of Calgary painter Chris Cran who did a series in the late 1980s about artists and money. In one painting, a grinning Cran is shaking hands with a similarly leering bespectacled cheque-bearing suit. The realistic-looking work is titled *Self-Portrait Accepting a Cheque for the Commission of This Painting*. What's fascinating about the painting is the look on the faces of the two partners in art. Both have visages plastered with wide fake grins, cheeks in crab-apple bulges, perfect shimmering teeth, nice suits, coiffed hair. The painting speaks to a disconcerting level of fakery and pretend. What can be given can be taken away. What seems to matter is not necessarily what matters.

Toronto video artist and "personality" Andrew J. Paterson captures this sense of façade and unease with panache in his 1994 video "Controlled Environments." Here, two Canada Council bureaucrats are depicted in a series of phone conversations with each other. Their names are A and B, and both of them are played by the robust Paterson, whose mincing, smug demeanour suggests a deeper truth of

vulnerability and repression. "Controlled Environments" is clearly an attempt by Paterson to access the collective unease the artist feels – but somehow cannot articulate – when dealing with the arts bureaucrats who partly control many an uncertain future. In the half-hour video, A and B get into repeated and sustained theoretical arguments, none of them resolved or even particularly useful. The bureaucrats watch dance videos, argue about war movies and bicker over who has better channels into council hierarchy, who got drunk at the Christmas party, whose head is on the chopping block when the perpetually looming cuts strike. "So why did you became an arts bureaucrat?" A asks B (or the other way around). "Basically for the same reason you did," B replies, "to make more money than I could as an artist." Later, other gems are unearthed, including the claim that at the Canada Council "the lack of ideology is the ideology" and "being an arts bureaucrat is the same as being an extra in a movie." The video, though, is not an attack on arts bureaucrats. Need I say that there are, of course, some excellent, devoted people working at all levels in the arts bureaucracy.... Rather, "Controlled Environments" speaks to the community of artists kept in perpetual dark about who bestows their money, who endorses their festival, who keeps their magazine going for another year. The video depicts the artists' collective frustration by portraying an imaginary arts bureaucracy in which repressed losers who never leave their cubicles haphazardly make decisions based on seemingly random theories of cultural practice.

These examples can only begin to suggest the way the ABA syndrome has lodged itself into the creative consciousness of Canadian artists. Still, they are potent, if rare, portals into the anxiety-ridden world of the Canuck creative. In these artworks, requisite uncertainty slips into unconscious parody not to mention overt self-loathing. The only tangible element in the whole process is the cheque that pays the rent (if you've successfully navigated the labyrinth) and the work you've devoted your life to do.

But none of us sets out to make art about granting agencies. This is one reason there are, in fact, relatively few direct portrayals in Canadian art dealing with the arts bureaucracy. I could only find one example of a larger community gathering to contemplate arts funding from a creative standpoint: a 1995 exhibit at Toronto's Gallery TPW entitled Culture Slash Nation. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the artist is inclined, naturally, to deal with bigger issues. Why make art about the struggle of the Canadian artist to secure funding when you can make more provocative, fascinating art about, oh, almost anything? Second, artists are so dependent on funding, they are unlikely to criticize the arts bureaucracy in any capacity that might endanger the cash flow.

This second explanation for the relative lack of sustained explorations of the effect of arts bureaucracy on creativity leads us into murky territory. It would seem

that to continue an examination of ABA, we must rely on anecdote, unsubstantiated paranoia and an overall look at the uneasy environment in which arts grants are dispensed in this country.

Let's start with the latter. For the past decade, the arts have been squeezed between Ontario's nonsensical revolution and Jean Chrétien's band of anti-visionary appeasers, not to mention the business-oriented media only too happy to exploit the latest "arts scandal" for the sake of ratings and *laissez-faire* capitalism. You can juggle the numbers any way you want, but there is no question that artists and their facilitators (publishers, curators) have felt under attack in the bottom-line 1990s. Though we now live in the age of surplus billions, no one is talking about putting money back into the arts. In this, artists and art bureaucrats and politicians are united; we keep our heads down, hoping that, with any luck, we will make it through the first decade of the new millennium without anybody noticing the fact that some vestiges of our funding apparatus still remain. When Heritage Canada finally released their new magazines fund designed to offset the Bill C-55 debâcle, they did it quietly, with nary a press release. In the new Canada perpetually "open for business," institutions are expected to replace a percentage of their funding with corporate sponsorships. This not only changes the kind of art that institutions are willing to exhibit, it also shifts the paradigm of understanding by which the arts are funded. It becomes an easy maxim to argue that all arts funding should be contingent on corporate generosity. Why should the government foot the bill when Bell, Chevy and McDonald's will?

The climate for arts funding, as a result, gets ever more hostile. A quick search in a Canadian news data base under the words "Canada Council" brings up articles almost uniformly reiterating the details of the latest arts funding scandal: *Maclean's* reporting, in a tone of snide shock, that *Bubbles Galore*, the Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council-funded lesbian porn fantasy film, was shown at the 1997 Freakzone International Festival of Trash Cinema. Then there's the 1999 article in *BC Report* with the headline "Wascally no more: a Manitoba artist receives $15,000 from the Canada Council to string up dead rabbits." Need I even mention the number of articles I found reporting on a $1,500 (!) grant to an emerging Native poet named Molly Morin who subsequently published a poetry chapbook called "Where Did My Ass Go?" When was the last time you saw the words "poetry chapbook" in a daily newspaper? Without a nasty title brought to our attention courtesy of the idiotic rambling of Reform Party pundit Inky Mark, the chapbook does not exist in the popular consciousness. And yet, there are chapbooks self-published by the hundreds every year in this country, many of them representing important emerging voices desperate to be heard above the prairie-wind whistles and barn-door creaks of Canadian literature. The media reports only on slip-ups, manufactured controversies, pretend outrage. Other outcomes, such as brilliant works of

art recognized nationally and even internationally made at least partly possible by various funding bodies, are either ignored or condemned to the inconsequence of the entertainment pages. Though none of these minor controversies has reached the fever pitch achieved when United States Senator Jesse Helms virulently attacked the National Endowment for the Arts (an organization that has floundered in a sea of funding cuts and insecurity ever since), they play their part in the two-decade-long, largely successful, rightist strategy of daemonizing government support for arts and culture in North America.

Still not convinced that arts funding has undergone a substantial propaganda attack over the past 10 years? I submit to you the strange sordid tale of Montreal cartoonist Rick Trembles who recounts in an issue of the great zine *Fish Piss* his experience doing an interview with the local CBC television news about an animation project he was working on. Of course, they weren't interested in his work as an artist, they were looking for weird projects that got grants from the Canada Council so they could disparage the idea of arts funding. The CBC, naturally, is hostile to all who compete for those precious cultural dollars. Or maybe not everyone there realizes that the CBC is just another arm of an extended arts bureaucracy that takes away as fast as it gives. When the reporter wanted to know what Trembles would tell people who think the money he got should have been spent on hospitals, the cartoonist knew he was in trouble. Despite trying desperately to add context to the interview and, finally, trying to have his participation pulled, the segment aired after an evening of sensational promo ads stating, "You may not like it, but your tax dollars are paying for it...." Naturally, Trembles's worst fears were confirmed. The bit portrayed him as a pretentious pervert, quoting him out of context saying that his work was about "the sexual history of a character from masturbation on" and then sniggering.

Working in this environment can be tough on the artist. Some try to respond in the media by writing their own articles. This is usually a good idea, as it is the only time anyone in the media will let "unfamous" artists speak for themselves. It also provides valuable insight into the mind of the Canadian artist struggling to reconcile ABA with creative aspirations.

In a *Quill & Quire* article, poet Molly Morin of "Ass" chapbook fame describes how important her grant was, how much confidence it gave her, how great it was to be recognized even with the small sum of $1,500. Morin's point is an important one: she argues that a grant is not necessarily about a monetary sum and what is done with it. A grant is about conferring self-worth on a creator, telling a would-be artist that no matter how little a society obsessed with new cars and new media seems to value what she does, there is an institution out there who will still award self- expression and community representation. Responding to criticism that her

poetry did not reflect so-called "Canadian values" she writes: "If what I have described isn't an investment in Canadian values, then I'm not sure what is."

The vast majority of artists, mind you, don't speak out publicly at all. But when asked what their relationship to grant bodies is like, the dam is opened and a torrent of emotions rushes out. One budding poet by the name of Kim Goodlife was particularly evocative on the subject of how the arts bureaucracies affected her creative life. This is the e-mail she sent me:

> Well, I'll tell you what happened to me. I applied for the Explorations Grant for a book-length poetry project called Songs For Tree Planters. I wanted to explore the borders of self, environment (TV or nature) and others. I was rejected. I was around 25. By the time I had started my Master's of Fine Arts in creative writing at UBC, six of these poems were going to be published in [literary journal] *Descant*. When I graduated from school, I applied for the Quest Program for a similar project, "Scarberia," talking about the same themes but in a style that was what I thought they wanted, something edgier, something more experimental. At this point, a friend of mine read my proposal and told me, if you don't get this grant you do the project anyway. Well, it ends up, the grant was rejected. I was really upset about this and took it personally. I thought that my work must suck. Eventually, I realized that I had to just put aside all these grants and contests and just focus on doing the work that I really was interested in. I'm not doing that Quest project but the one that was originally rejected when I was 25. I'm now 33. What I've learned is that there's a difference between getting the financial approval and getting the personal approval to do the work. I used to think that I couldn't do the work without the funding but I've found a way to do the work with a part-time job, try to find editing at free writer-in-residence programs. I used to think the work was no good because it kept getting rejected but now I'm beyond that, that's such a petty way to look at creativity – this is my creative life and I was treating it like a business client. Next step for me is to go back to all the projects I've abandoned because I never got financial approval and finish them. (There's also a novel that was rejected in there.) I'm applying to Banff for a workshop with Daphne Marlatt and it's 80 per cent funded. If it wasn't, I wouldn't be able to go because I work part-time and I have a $30,000-student loan to pay off. As for the Canada Council, I'm applying again for this Songs For Tree Planters project in October. By then the project will be almost completed. I have little hope of getting the money but I wanna try. At least now I know the difference between feeling personally rejected and feeling like the work is rejected, so I'm not attached to the outcome creatively. It may seem like a basic lesson but it took me a long time to learn.

You'll note that Molly Morin learned a reverse lesson: she got her grant, and so was empowered, personally – not financially – to pursue her poetry and publish her chapbook.

Either way, ABA rears its ugly head in an age where Canadian artists, beset with constant insecurities concerning the worth of their fledging ideas, must inevitably turn to the arts bureaucracies for a legitimization that is far from inevitable. There's also a nice lesson to be learned here about what happens when an impersonal government agency dabbles in the creative process. A faceless verdict is issued; lacking context or explanation or encouragement, one can easily mistake that verdict as more powerful and knowledgeable than anyone – including the jury making the decision – ever meant it to be. Artists have always needed funding. They used to – and I suppose a lucky few still do – have personal patrons who would let them use the little hut at the end of the driveway, provided they made themselves available for a quick exchange of *bon mots* on the patron's way in and out of the mansion. It wasn't exactly security, but at least it was honest: you knew what was expected of you, and what you might get in return. And you were dealing with a human being whom you could butter up, antagonize, beseech and otherwise scheme around. How do you work your charm on a form? How do you wheedle a change of mind out of a rejection letter?

The writer, filmmaker and playwright R.M. Vaughn told me another story that nicely documents this aspect of the ABA syndrome. It all starts when he has an argument in 1993 with a Canada Council bureaucrat concerning "what constitutes a visual artist." As he says: "The argument got really ugly, and I hung up on the nice lady." In 1994, he submitted a required report for a separate grant he got to write a book. That report was not filed for two years, and every grant application he submitted from 1994 to 1996 was rejected, ostensibly because of this missing report. But, Vaughn told me, "I'm convinced I had a big black mark next to my name for at least two years, following my nasty argument with the 'crat. I have asked people I know who've worked in the higher ends of the CC [Canada Council], and they all tell me that there is an informal black-dot system in place. So, watch your phone manners!"

Ah, the delicious paranoia of the Canadian artist, beset by a whirlwind of invisible forces and frustrations so out of his control he ends up giving in to them – hanging up in anger, that small moment of empowerment and retribution causing, in the end, more trouble than it was worth.

I could relate more anecdotes, an endless array of complaints, suspicions and arguments. But let's assume that the ABA syndrome has been at least partially explicated. Fuelled by a hostile neo-con agenda, it ends up influencing our creative actions, which in turn has an effect on what Canadian art and culture looks, reads and feels like to its ever-shrinking audience. As Patrick Walsh, until recently editor of

Masthead, the trade magazine for the Canadian magazine industry, puts it: "I definitely believe that some magazines skew their content in order to tap into the various government grants." But, he goes on to ask,

> How to avoid this? Or is it something to be avoided? Do not many artists create art because they know it will sell and earn them money? Do they always create art just for the sake of art and hope someone might like it and pay for it? I'm sure there must be some kind of subconscious survival mechanism in place that precludes the literal realization of the term "starving artist." Or maybe that's why so many so-called artists also wait tables.

Walsh perceptively sums up the questions this article seeks to raise. What, after all, is the alternative to the subtle shifts in our creative priorities we make to survive? Who will, in the end, blame us for the small compromises that ensure daily survival (while staving off the need for a day job)? And who, in the end, can blame the arts bureaucracy for similarly attempting to ensure its survival, paying lip-service to grass-roots culture and new programmes for younger, edgier artists, even as they impose the cost-cutting agenda of their bosses on unwilling creative communities?

In a 1987 video work by Cathy Busby and Melodie Calvert entitled *Girls Just Want to Have Funds*, a hapless gallery director is sucked into the soulless machinery of the arts institution. The director is shown collecting garbage after an opening, attending a penny-pinching budget meeting and sipping a cheap bottle of beer alone in a diner. At the beginning of the video, the director – once an aspiring artist who came to management as a way to make a living – finds a lottery ticket. At the end, she checks her ticket against the winning numbers, and the image cuts to a scene from an old western in which the desperate proprietor of a casino tells her employee to spin the wheel, though the saloon is empty. "Spin the wheel anyway," she commands. "I like to hear it."

Should so much of the creative process be a crap shoot? Must the Canadian artist apply year after year for her daily bread, without ever really knowing what the outcome will be? Maybe we should just shut up, be happy we have any kind of support at all, living as we do in this giant office building of a country, culture a mere display to brighten up the boardroom wall. Regardless, ABA is the ugly, gnawing feeling we get when we sense that our livelihood is under threat by forces – global, governmental – that we can neither affect nor predict. It is also the emotion that compels the Canadian artist to find ways to live the creative life, whether it's a matter of abandoning the grant game and taking jobs (accepting, as a result, a kind of *de facto* amateur status – the difference between training for the Olympics full time, or during evenings and weekends), or forging ahead under the soul-deadening weight

of triplicate applications and joint funding project grant provisos. Despite – or perhaps because of – our ever-diminished status, we are convinced that our importance lies in our perseverance (success, though, is too much to ask for). Late one night, I pry open a new notebook and write the title of what I hope will become, in three or five or ten years, the next great Canadian novel. "Spin the wheel anyway," I think. "I like to hear it."