

## FLEX SPOTLIGHT SUMMARY: COLLABORATING WITH ARTISTS

### FLEX SPOTLIGHT SERIES – COLLABORATING WITH ARTISTS

The FLeX Spotlight Sessions were part of the [FLEX: Collaboration](#) training program. This 3-part series was geared towards those interested in learning more about how Canadian arts & heritage festivals can build and implement stronger collaboration strategies through international and local examples.

Recordings of the entire series are available on [WorkInCulture's YouTube Channel](#).



Originally held on March 16, 2022, in this second session, *Collaborating with Artists*, guests from UK- and USA-based festivals and arts presenting organizations met with Ontario-based “context translator” Owais Lightwala to discuss year-round collaborations with artists: from outreach & participation projects to talent development programs, co-productions, commissions, interdisciplinary experimentations, and intersectoral explorations.

**Featuring:** Steve Mead, Artistic Director/CEO and co-founder of Manchester Jazz Festival (UK), Helen Goodman, General Manager for Manchester Jazz Festival (UK), Daniel Valtueña, formerly with Queens Council on the Arts (USA), with Local Translator Owais Lightwala, Assistant Professor in Performance at the Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Fanny Martin, Art of Festivals, and Stephanie Draker, WorkInCulture as co-hosts and facilitators.



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### FLEX SPOTLIGHT CASE STUDIES

#### **1 – Daniel Valtueña, (former) Artist Commissioning Program Manager, Queens Council on the Arts (USA)**

**SPEAKER BIO:** [Daniel Valtueña](#) (he/him) is an arts administrator, educator, and researcher based in New York and Madrid. At the [Queens Council on the Arts](#), he worked towards democratizing the traditional art commissioning process and is the editor of [How You Can Commission Art: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing New Culture](#).

**ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW:** The [Queens' Council on the Arts](#) is non-profit organization founded in 1966. The mission of the Queens Council on the Arts is to foster and develop the arts in Queens County and to support individual artists and arts organizations in presenting their cultural diversity for the benefit of the community. QCA is now part of the Kaufman Arts District in Astoria, Queens.

#### **DEFINING AND REDEFINING ART COMMISSIONING:**

The Queen's Council on the Arts (QCA) is one of the five city councils in the city of New York. With the Artist Commissioning Program, the Council set out to redefine art commissioning – in all disciplines, including performing arts – to democratize it and make it locally relevant.

The traditional definition of art commissioning is the process by which an artist or artistic group is mandated to create a new work for a specific purpose. Commissioning is typically associated with power and privilege: the King as commissioner, wealthy people dictating their taste. To put this power of commissioning into the hands of people, QCA developed a methodology to create the conditions for everyone to be able to commission art in their communities: principles and processes for institutions and arts organizations to invite people to participate in the process of commissioning by connecting artists with local people, making institutions more transparent and democratizing the access to culture.

The first part of this methodology is about democratizing the commissioning process. We need to advocate for people to engage with the arts, not only as members of the audience, or as people who buy tickets for shows, but also as people who participate in the process of art commissioning and have a voice for their culture and their communities to be represented on the stage.

Then we must bust some myths and preconceptions about this process: the reality is that people don't feel invited to commission art because they don't think they have the knowledge or the resources.

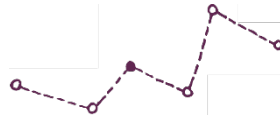
**Some of these myths include:**



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- **“You have to be wealthy”** → arts organizations and public institutions should put the money into people's hands for them to decide which art is created and promoted.
- **“You have to be culturally savvy”** → everyone is an expert in their own life. Local residents – teachers, activists, business owners... – have a wealth of knowledge and are well placed to know their community and the problems that could be addressed through the arts.
- **“It’s difficult and complex”** → QCA developed a step-by-step guide to art commissioning.

Queens-based art commissioners are selected from an open call and remunerated for their time. The artists and projects they select, with support from program staff, are relevant to here and now. This program, built to be replicable and adapted to other communities, aims to make the art world more diverse, accessible, and meaningful for society.



### 2 - Steve Mead & Helen Goodman, Manchester jazz festival (UK)

**SPEAKERS BIOS:** [Steve Mead](#) is Artistic Director/CEO and co-founder (in 1996) of [Manchester Jazz Festival](#) (mjf), where he has pioneered programs for talent and audience development and commissioning new work. mjf won the [Europe Jazz Network](#) Award for Adventurous Programming (2016), the Artistic Director’s Exchange Award (2017), is a PRS Foundation Talent Development Partner and was the first UK [Keychange](#) Associate Festival, in recognition of mjf’s achievements in gender-balanced programming.

**Helen Goodman** is a Creative Producer who enjoys working collaboratively with artists and creatively designing projects from the outset. She is the General Manager for [Manchester Jazz Festival](#) and runs their talent development programs 'hothouse' and 'soundcheck'.

First staged in the summer of 1996, the annual [Manchester Jazz Festival](#) has grown to feature hundreds of musicians, across 80 – 100 free and charged events each year. The festival champions regional jazz artists, present new and original materials through commissions and premieres, and supports up and coming musicians through several year-round talent development programs that have helped launched the careers of a host of artists.

**ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW:** mjf (Manchester Jazz Festival)’s mission is to be a place **where artists can find themselves an audience**. The festival program is broad-ranging and genre-busting, celebrating Manchester’s creativity and history and contributing to making it a place where artists can work and live and where local audiences can experience high quality culture.



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The festival has a history of pioneering initiatives in the UK, such as launching the first festival podcast, the first jazz commissioning scheme, making recyclable water bottle mandatory on stage, signing up to national and international pledges such as Keychange, a global initiative to rebalance the agenda on festival stages, and Black Lives in Music.

### OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE ARTISTS IN WAYS THAT SUPPORT CAREER GROWTH:

To fulfil its mission, the festival continues to pay attention to the needs that are not met, and identified **critical gaps within the sector in how artists, especially from specific groups, were given access to opportunities or platforms to develop new work:**

- artists working at the grassroots level.
- artists working outside the formal education route.
- artists from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- female instrumentalists.
- artists in remote and rural locations.

The festival devised support programs that built upon individual artists' needs rather than running a set course that artists would be channeled through: everything is bespoke and tailored to individual artists, with special attention given to providing what wasn't already replicated elsewhere, which proved particularly successful to leverage fundraising. Programs running for several years have been refined and new bespoke ones have emerged to respond further to needs, such as:

- *mjf originals*, a scheme for commissioning new work
- *mjf introduces*, giving young artists their first big gig.
- *hothouse*, a diversity-driven artist development program over six months to help artists overcome barriers.
- *soundcheck*, a junior-level version of hothouse to introduce 18–25-year-old artists to improvisation.
- and a new program in development for behind-the-scenes people such as producers and people who work invisibly in the arts.

The festival acts as a producer, an invisible enabler that makes the artists the star of the show. For this, it's essential to take time and invest effort into **recruitment, selection and communication**. All these artists' opportunities are open calls to which anyone can apply, supported by ongoing processes and principles:

- making a lot of noise about **artistic priorities**.
- being **open about the decision-making process** to help people understand why they might not be successful.



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- **taking the time in recruitment** – this can mean spending an hour or more with each individual artist before determining whether they're right for a scheme.
- **offering feedback** if people don't get through.
- creating a **level playing field between the festival and the artists.**

By identifying a need in the sector and offering concrete solutions, the festival has been able to fill the opportunity gap for artists and has been successful in fundraising. Over the years, these programs have made a tangible difference in the types of artists who are coming through into the workforce.

### STEVE'S TIPS FOR MEASURING SUCCESS:

- success is finding something you like doing and getting someone else to pay for it.
- success is learning how to manage your disappointments when you don't get what you want
- success is getting to the end of something in one piece without having a breakdown

#### And to fuel this success:

- **Remember to take risks.** Funders want to see us being competent enough to turn getting something wrong into learning from it.
- **Surround yourself with people who are much better than you are.**

The art of successfully collaborating with artists – that is to say enabling others to shine – is really the art of becoming invisible.



### 3 - Owais Lightwala, Professor, Producer & Entrepreneur (Canada)

**SPEAKER BIO:** [Owais Lightwala](#) is an Assistant Professor in Performance at the Creative School (Toronto Metropolitan University), where his teaching and research focuses on creative producing and arts entrepreneurship. Prior to that, he spent 8 years as the Managing Director for [Why Not Theatre](#), helping build a startup that has become one of Canada's leading culture disruptors. He has completed business and leadership training from Harvard Business School, Stanford Graduate School of Business, [TAC Leaders Lab](#) and CivicAction DiverseCity Fellowship. He serves on the boards of [TO Live](#), [Mass Culture](#), [The AMY Project](#), and [Art Ignite](#).

### KEY INSIGHTS FROM DIALOGUE

- *How do we learn from pilots and experiments that respond to an identified need for change?*





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- Embed evaluation into programs right from the start and be curious and open to feedback.
  - Consider emotional response as a valuable metric.
  - Accept that tangible results may only become clear a few years into a program
  - The more we do, the more we learn and the more we realize that there are still more barriers to remove.
- ***How do we make Open Calls truly open, fair and accessible to everyone?***
    - Identify the barriers that could prevent people from applying, through research, testing and feedback, and actively work to remove them at each new round. Even if a call is free to respond to, what are the other invisible, non-financial costs involved?
    - Learn about your area or sector demographics: how does the data compare with the submission you are receiving? For example, in a linguistically diverse area, Open Calls that are only in English may prevent other communities of language and culture from applying or feeling included.
    - Be transparent about the selection and decision-making process and ensure that your frameworks are in line with your principles. For example, if the goal is to redistribute power into the community (of residents or artists), the selection panel could be made up, in part or fully, of program alumni or independently appointed people with relevant knowledge. This could also include paying people for their time and acknowledging their contributions.
  - ***How do we initiate change within systems that tend to only fund evidence-based projects?***
    - Our current public funding systems fund a project only once enough evidence is collected to prove that it's not that risky, or scale up projects that already have a workable basis and considerable investment.
    - On the other hand, the Artist Commissioning Program started off as a prototype with the investment of a private foundation that had a trust-based relationship with the Council.
    - In 2008, mjf was encouraged by an Arts Council officer to create a commissioning policy in order to include the commissioning of yet-to-be-selected artists into their core budget. Based on a decision-making process chart and 10 core metrics still in use today, this policy reassured the funder that there was a rigorous framework in place that could deliver consistent results.

### OWAIS' OPENING CONTEXTUALIZATION:

In his career, most recently as producer with Why Not Theatre, he has been reflecting on the questions raised in this Spotlight: **how do we serve artists? How do we serve communities? How do we do things better? How do we take risks and how do we fail in more interesting ways to solve some of these challenges?**



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A key take-away that emerges from the guest presentations is the notion of **access**:

- **access for artists** who have not previously seen themselves as artists or seeing art as an industry for them to participate in;
- **access for the art commissioners** who would never see themselves in that label – especially interesting as a way to create pathways towards careers in curating, or arts management and producing for people who don't have the privilege, entitlement or financial ability that may seem required to access such positions.

**Access** is truly the fundamental problem that these initiatives are trying to address by **collaborating with artists in a different way: access for artists, access for the communities who are interacting with the art and access for people who are artist-adjacent in making that art happen.**

Why Not Theatre runs the Riser Project, an initiative created specifically to help provide access to production opportunities to artists who don't have this pathway available to them, because producing performance is really expensive and difficult. What Why Not struggled with and tried to solve is the balance between **replicability and bespoke**; and both initiatives presented in this Spotlight illustrate different directions. In the Queen's Council on the Arts' commissioning program, there is a **guide** in place for the program to be **adapted and applied to other places**. Manchester Jazz Festival's talent development approach is about **avoiding to packaging or finding a one-size-fit-all recipe, instead taking a lot of time to be bespoke**. This is an interesting tension to examine at funder level from a risk-taking perspective. While funders want the idea of risk, they often struggle with the idea of **not being able to replicate, standardize and evaluate in very clear metrics**. It's a legitimate structural challenge: how can we create structure around something that needs to be an individual response, or needs to be responsive and reactive in a way that, as soon as you structure and standardize, creates new inaccessibility, new exclusions, new limitations and barriers for people?

In Toronto, the Theatre Centre is known for its residency program, which has supported many great Canadian artists. What makes this program so great is its spirit of radical generosity, simply asking artists: "What do you need?", and accompanying them on a long term, deep, supportive, collaborative process. It's very hard to do, and it's really taxing for any organization embarked on such a process. It throws up new questions, such as: **Where are the limits of generosity? How do you set good healthy boundaries for yourself, for your organization, for the artists?**

Going from **presenting mindset to producing mindset** is comparable to **going from being friends with somebody to being a roommate** – as per the saying, "if you really want to get to know someone, live with them". While long-term relationships require deep trust, there will inevitably be conflict between



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people who have different needs and personalities. This is **one of the hardest aspects about producing to name and grasp**, compared to business models, grants and marketing.

### OWAIS' CLOSING CONTEXTUALISATION

The models presented are evidencing the importance of **addressing real needs: the better attuned you are to the needs of your artists, your communities and your organization, the easier it is to figure out what to do next.**

**Access** is also a crucial question: who has the opportunity to make art, to curate, to experience it? **Who has power in our society, and what do we want this power to do?**

Finally, public funding sources, and institutions in general, are by nature slow to respond to changes, including changes in needs. Institutions are designed to withstand change – including political changes around them – so that they can sustainably implement their mission. This is why smaller organizations have a distinct advantage when it comes to change: **there's a freedom in being new and unencumbered by the limitations of your own history.** Organizations that are **small, nimble and free of institutional expectations** can take risks that will take decades for larger institutions to catch up upon.

If public funding can be so slow to respond to and support innovation, **where's the right place to take your brilliant new ideas?** Is it a waste of time banging your head against a public funder wall until you have more demonstrated evidence and track record and enough of the case to make?

**It's also key to define and measure success on your own terms**, because it's all too easy to get lost in the idea of the thing rather than focusing on the thing we were trying to do – are we actually achieving that? When what we are trying to achieve is to “put on a festival every year”, it's not the same as saying “**what we're trying to do every year is increase access for artists who've never had opportunity to play music at this kind of level**”. A lot of organizations are trying to stay the same and stay alive just because they assume they need to exist. But the bigger questions to grapple with are: **What is the thing you actually set out to do? Is it still what you are doing now? And how do you know you're doing it?**





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### Acknowledgements

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# Canada



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**ON CULTURE DAYS**



WorkInCulture would also like to acknowledge and extend our deep thanks to our Curriculum Consultant, Fanny Martin of Art of Festivals, for summarizing and synthesizing this information.



Fanny is an international creative producer & facilitator specialised in festivals, networks, interdisciplinary projects and art in public space. Born and educated in France, she developed an eclectic freelance project portfolio in the UK before moving to Canada and founding [Art of Festivals](#), a creative company that designs transformative events to spark change and enchant everyday life. In collaboration with artists, educators, researchers, technologists and activists, her work focuses on producing memorable shared experiences, shaping change strategies, experimenting with participatory frameworks and designing learning & evaluation programmes.

