



**THINKING ROCK  
COMMUNITY ARTS**



# STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF NORTHERN ONTARIO BY SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE

December 2021

“We have the stories.  
We have the story of our stories.  
Who are we telling that story to?  
And what are they going to do with it?”  
- research participant





Since October 2018, **Thinking Rock Community Arts** - a nonprofit arts organization based in Thessalon, Ontario - has been supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts to bring together community-engaged Indigenous and settler artists from across Northern Ontario to consider the question:

“What challenges and opportunities are community-engaged artists and organizations based in the rural and First Nation contexts of Northern Ontario facing, and what support, research, and policy might help make this work easier/more sustainable?”



In response to this question, these artists have shared their stories loudly and decisively. They have spoken with one voice to define what is needed to support this work in this region and across the province.



## WHAT IS COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE?

Community-engaged artistic approaches involve professional artists working alongside populations who do not self-identify as artists to co-create professional artistic outcomes.

The co-created artworks are inspired by the stories and histories of the communities where the artistic process takes place.

The long, deep engagement required of these creative processes results in a variety of individual and/or social impacts that address the unique needs of the communities served (for example: mental health, social isolation, racial injustice, etc.).



# THE STORY OF OUR STORIES REPORT

The Story of Our Stories (SOOS) Report shares these stories, and aims to raise awareness about the many economic, social and cultural impacts that community-engaged artists, organizations and projects are having every day in their communities.

At the same time, the report identifies the barriers and challenges community-engaged artists experience while carrying out their work.

The intention behind sharing this story is to provide opportunities and solutions to these barriers and challenges, so that community stakeholders and decision-makers can use their power and influence to address some of the major challenges that community-engaged arts experience. This will further support the development of healthier, more connected communities across Northern Ontario, and ultimately support community healing.

“If the healing comes first, the economic prosperity will follow. You have to heal people in order for them to actually be able to support themselves and their families and their communities.”

- research participant



## THE FINDINGS OF THE STORY OF OUR STORIES REPORT

**Community-engaged arts practice and arts organizations in Northern Ontario, like Thinking Rock, work to meet the unique needs of Northern communities by:**

**Reducing costs and strain on existing mental health services in Northern and First Nation communities** by increasing access to and availability of alternative free all-ages community services that use virtual and in-person arts-based approaches to reduce social isolation, improve the mental health of participants, increase social supports and foster community cohesion

**Addressing racial injustice by raising awareness, confronting injustice and amplifying voices** of systemically oppressed groups and individuals through art-making which promotes sharing of experiences, story-sharing on difficult topics and issues, fosters authentic community relationships and ultimately supports community healing

**Increasing the economic stability of Northern and First Nation communities** by creating local jobs in the arts and culture sector and increasing the financial sustainability of rural cultural industries

## TOP IMPACTS OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE IN RURAL AND FIRST NATION COMMUNITIES

Increasing local arts-related employment opportunities



Building relationships across ages and cultures

Increasing community pride

Improving mental health of participants

Removing social isolation of participants

### They do this by:

Building **diverse, authentic relationships** (across culture, age, skills, and communities)

Engaging in **social and civic engagement**

Paying witness to **healing**

Anchoring **personal growth** of participants

Facilitating **care of place** and deeper **community engagement**

Creating opportunities for **professional development and employment**

Stimulating **dialogue and story-sharing** on difficult topics/ issues

**Thinking Rock's** work is just one example of how community-engaged art practices contribute to the development and healing of their community.

Thinking Rock has been creating and supporting economic viability through the arts sector while promoting community healing by reducing and eliminating barriers to access; providing community-engaged arts programming; fostering community participation and inclusion in art-making; and creating spaces for dialogue to promote community resilience and reconciliation.

However, due to the precarious and unsustainable nature of the community-engaged arts sector, the gaps which exist and the limited resources available to Northern

Since its founding, Thinking Rock has created over **100 local jobs** and attracted over **\$1 million** in funding which has been directly invested into the communities it serves.

Ontario, compounded with the barriers, limitations and challenges of the current pandemic, this work may either be crushed under the weight of the economic and social challenges ahead, or be supported by those with the power and influence to do so.

**The SOOS Report identified the following barriers and challenges that community-engaged artists, organizations and projects experience in serving their communities:**

**Financial precarity** caused by the scarcity and instability of funding and/or employment opportunities, and the lack of benefits needed in order to support artists and community workers

**Stigma and/or devaluing arts-based work as professional work** perpetuated by lack of supports and capacity-building available to communities across Northern Ontario, and lack of opportunities for local and regional training, residencies and professional development

**Trauma, social isolation, and racism** perpetuated by systemic barriers and by a lack of access to adequate/culturally-appropriate resources for managing daily operations while concurrently maintaining quality of participant engagement, experience and support

**TOP CHALLENGES FACING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE IN RURAL AND FIRST NATION COMMUNITIES**

-  Financial precarity (e.g., scarcity of funding or employment; lack of benefits)
-  Stigma or devaluing of arts-based work as professional work
-  Mental health of participants and/or arts workers
-  Vicarious trauma
-  Social isolation
-  Racism

**These challenges are fueled by:**

<b>Systemic barriers</b> of racism and colonialism	<b>Lack of public understanding</b> of / advocacy for the arts	<b>Not enough funding</b> to sustain work	<b>Lack of other supports / work opportunities</b>
<b>Lack of sustainability</b>	<b>Assessing and communicating the value</b> of community-engaged arts	<b>Balancing personal &amp; professional needs with demands</b> of community-engaged arts	<b>Lack of adequate resources</b> to manage day-by-day operations while maintaining quality of participant engagement and experience and engaging in sensitive/emotionally triggering topics



The SOOS Report's findings - as well as engagement with community-engaged artists, organizations and stakeholders from communities across Northern Ontario - have highlighted the following opportunities and solutions that can help address these barriers and challenges so that community-engaged artists and organizations can continue working towards and contributing to the development and healing of their communities.

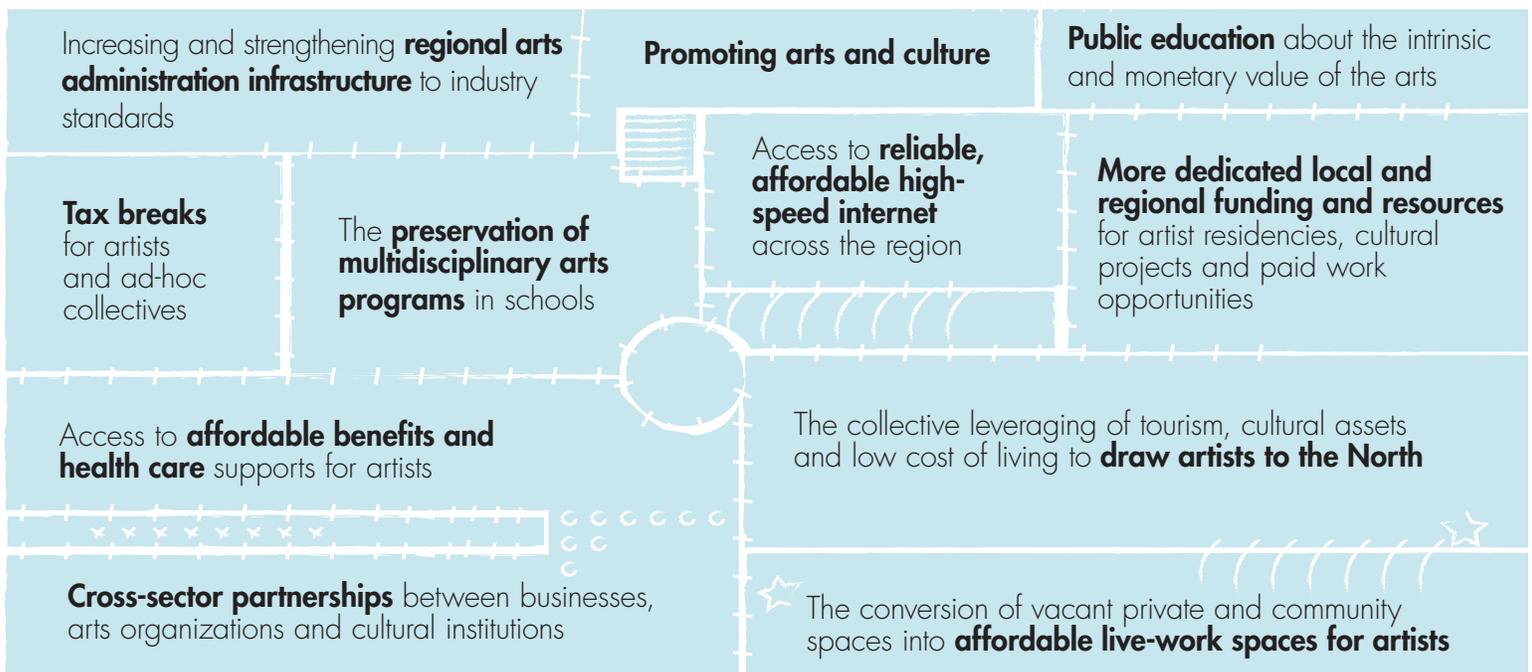
When thinking of these opportunities and challenges, project participants spoke with one voice.

**They proposed two main solutions to achieve this:**

**To attract, retain and support community-engaged artists in the region**

**To establish a central organizing body specifically to support and connect community-engaged artists and organizations across the region**

## TO FURTHER DEVELOP CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND ATTRACT, RETAIN AND SUPPORT ARTISTS ACROSS THE REGION THROUGH:



# TO CREATE A PROVINCIAL ARTS SERVICE ORGANIZATION, THAT WILL SERVE THE SECTOR AND PRIORITIZE THE NEEDS OF NORTHERN ONTARIO THROUGH:

Providing **public education** about community-engaged artistic practices

Creating a **central human resources support system for artists**

Providing **benefits and health care supports for community-engaged artists**

Supporting **community participation, access, involvement and engagement**

Creating a **regional support network** connecting community-engaged artists and organizations, with representatives embedded across the region

Advocating for community-engaged artists and arts administrators to be **paid according to industry standards** (and clarifying what those might be in community-engaged arts practice)

Creating opportunities for **region-specific arts administration training, workshops and other professional development** (including marketing and business skills) to support the emergence of more community-engaged artists and organizations



**These two solutions for attracting, retaining and supporting community-engaged artists are the key to the door to new possibilities and opportunities for the community-engaged arts sector - and the communities it benefits - across the North.**

Taking such steps to **attract, retain** and **support** community-engaged artists within the region would nourish healthy development of the arts and culture sector, informed by diversity of thought, which would in turn allow make our Northern communities more vibrant, equitable and livable.

This is the story of our stories as community-engaged artists across the region. As one participant phrased it: going forward, we have the opportunity to support *"that creative spirit which is fundamental in our survival and...not [go] back to the way it was before...[but] move forward with art and creativity and build our spirits in a more healthy way."*

Read the Full Report Here: [thinkingrock.ca/the-story-of-our-stories](http://thinkingrock.ca/the-story-of-our-stories)



With special thanks to our partners and funders:



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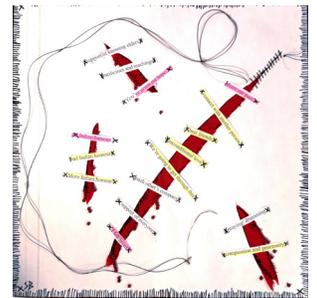
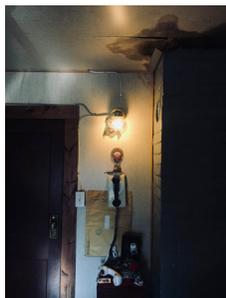
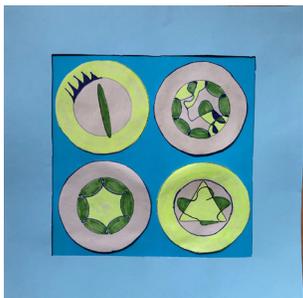
*We would also like to acknowledge the Ontario Arts Council who supported the initial 2018 gathering of northern Ontario community-engaged artists through their Strategic Collaborations Fund.*

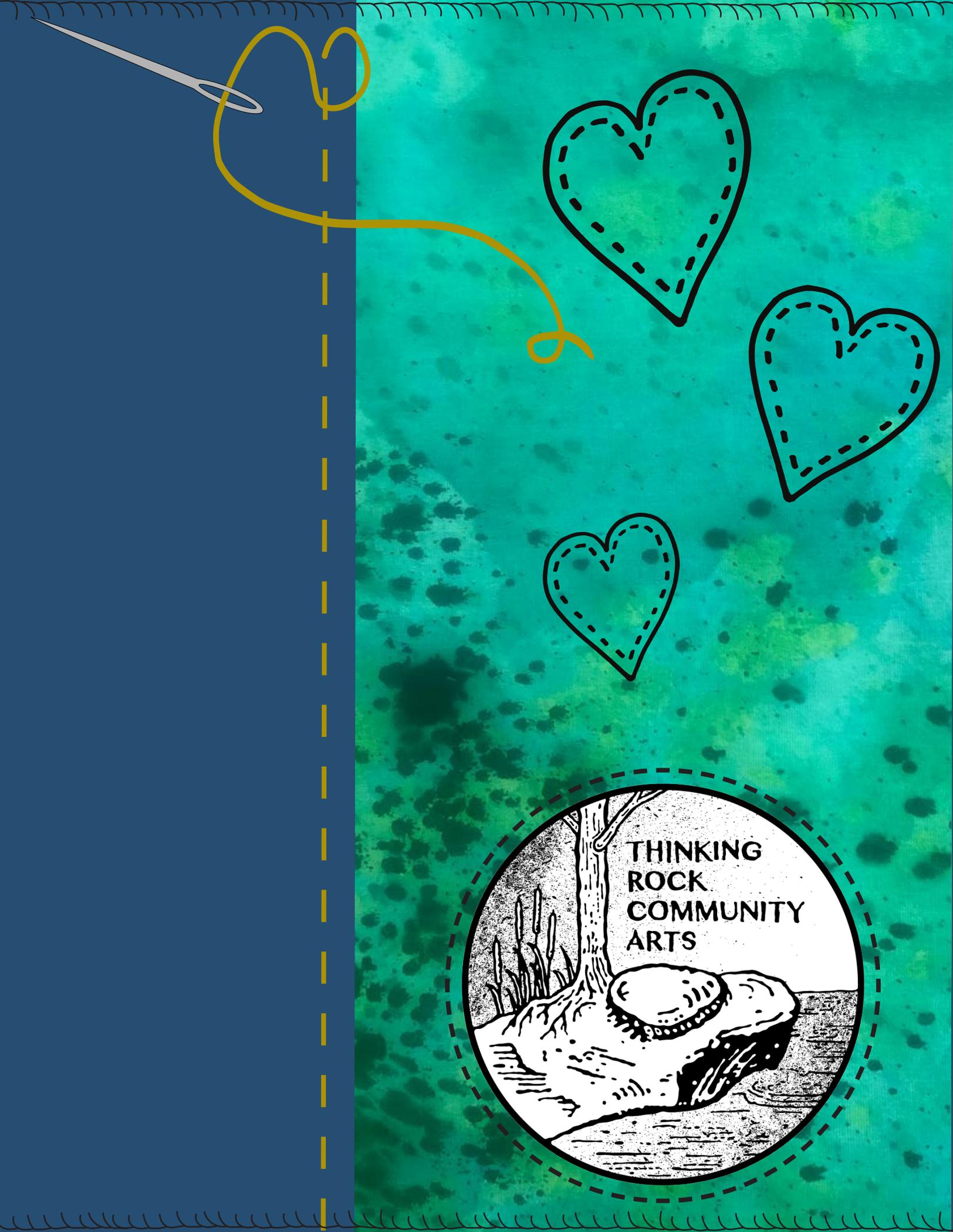
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