

Visual Arts and New Media Individual Project Funding
Detailed Project Description

Tyler J Stewart

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I wish to acknowledge that I am living and working on the territory of the Siksikaitsitapi past, present, and future.

INTRODUCTION

Working as an independent curator and writer living in Lethbridge (Treaty 7 Blackfoot territory), my practice focuses on social engagement and community building. My projects have been diverse in nature and seek to foster multi-disciplinary collaboration, creating new events and experiences that encourage participation, and that are meaningful to the communities from which they originate. This work has involved contemporary art exhibitions, museum exhibitions, temporary public art installations, and festivals.

From 2013-2015 I held the position of Exhibitions Project Manager for the National Music Centre in Calgary, overseeing the development of 21,000 sq. ft. of innovative new exhibitions. This work involved coordinating the national exhibitions advisory committee, and managing contractors from around the world including exhibit designers, content developers, exhibit fabricators, and multimedia specialists. We challenged traditional museum methodology with a new approach for content development, employing writers from across the country to share authentic, personal narratives. I also worked to include contemporary art-making within the exhibitions, partnering with artist Kim Alpert to develop an interactive visual art experience.

In 2017 I presented *From Pianos to Power Chords* at the Galt Museum, an exhibition with community engagement at its core. Engaging almost 90 local participants to share stories of music from the community, we included diverse viewpoints from the southwest Alberta region. I also contracted local illustrator Eric Dyck on this project to adapt the exhibition text into a full-length comic book published during the exhibition closing. This collaboration expanded the reach of the project and re-engaged the community, with community contributors being transformed into illustrated characters to share their memories in print form.

I have also co-curated *Into The Streets Public Art Series* since 2017, which has embedded art, creativity, livability, and social responsibility into public space, and facilitated engaging experiences open to everyone. This series engages large and diverse audiences by combining new artistic experiences with successful local festivals. Temporary art installations and participatory artworks are incorporated into special events, with the aim to reach audiences beyond those who typically participate in Lethbridge's formalized arts programming. Moving past the physical boundaries of gallery spaces, this series brings a sense of wonder, joy, and amazement to downtown Lethbridge.

Most recently, I have expanded my past work on music-related exhibition programming to focus on larger ideas around the role that sound plays in society, focusing on cross-cultural productions and receptions of sound. This research was supported by an AFA grant in 2018, and has led to the development of a new contemporary art exhibition project to be presented in 2020 at Borealis Gallery, within the Alberta Legislature in Edmonton.

OBJECTIVES

I am seeking support from the AFA to focus my work as an independent curator into a specific area of expertise. By pursuing my Master of Arts in Cultural, Social, and Political Thought through the University of Lethbridge, I am seeking to become a subject matter expert regarding the role sound plays in society, and focus my future curatorial work specifically around this subject for the rest of my career in the field. AFA's funding would support my first year of academic studies, which will be focused on the coursework component of the program.

In past years, my projects have been diverse in nature, though often focused on music-related projects. In December 2018, I received AFA funding to begin developing an art exhibition around sound art, researching artists who use sound as a form of resistance against methods of social control. Through that project, I gained more knowledge around the subject of sound and society, and was able to confirm my first curatorial project on this topic, which will be presented at Borealis Gallery in Edmonton, from May to September 2020.

During this research period, I realized the potential to delve more deeply into this subject as an area of career focus within my curatorial ambitions. There is a lack of literature on the subject of sound within the field of contemporary art, as it is often viewed with misunderstanding, or seen as a separate field altogether more akin to new media or musical projects. I am excited at the opportunity to develop a specific knowledge base in an under-represented area within contemporary art, carving out an important niche for my future work as a curator and writer.

While completing this initial research, I came to realize that our ears can actually no longer hear. My research will investigate this fact: the overlooked (or more precisely – unheard) role of sound in society. Why is it important to understand different cultural receptions and productions of sound? Who gets to speak and who is silenced, for what reasons? What might we do to remix these societal "sound structures," inspire deep listening as a vital means of participation, and create more equitable auralities?

Drawing from theories that demonstrate how "perceived meaning has privileged a model, or referent in visual presence rather than in acoustic penetration," (Nancy, 2007), my research aims to make audible phenomenological understandings of how "speaking fills the space between us and by it I am auditorily immersed and penetrated as sound 'physically' *invades* my own body" (Ihde, 1976). Further, Kahn (1999) observed that "Othering" occurs through societal constructs that position "certain types of people outside any representation of social harmony, so that their speech and other sounds associated with them are considered to be noise."

The change in our soundscape since the industrial revolution is one of the largest societal shifts humanity has experienced, but it has gone largely unnoticed, and received very little study. As silent spaces continue to be eradicated, what mythologies have we lost? As the materiality of modern society has shifted, what aural effects does the "thud of plastic" create in our emotional well-being compared to previously common materials such as wood or glass with more resonance (Schafer, 1977)? Whereas church bells and town carillons previously created a sense of social cohesion, what sonic signals remain to bring together communities today?

In today's "iPod society" (Bull, 2007), the trend towards "mediated urban isolation" is of growing significance. My research will investigate methods to make these situations more audible and propose ways that sound can be employed to build stronger communities, rather than sonically divide them. Artists play an incredibly important role in this pursuit, showing the potential of sound and sound-based artworks to create new meanings and understandings in relation to political, environmental and cultural issues. Not only can sound be used as a medium in the creation of contemporary art, but as a lever through which a sense of social solidarity can be developed. My research will extend from socio-cultural understandings, towards showing how

artistic deployments of sound can make a greater impact and create new ways of understanding the world around us.

Most importantly for my own work as an independent curator and writer, this research will position me as a subject matter expert on the role of sound in society. Having this distinct knowledge base will be invaluable for the development of future artistic projects and seeking opportunities within the field of contemporary art exhibition-making.

PLANNED ACTIVITIES

Research: This grant would support the first year of coursework in pursuit of my Master of Arts in Cultural, Social, and Political Thought at the University of Lethbridge. Working under the co-supervision of Kimberly Mair (Sociology) and Dana Cooley (New Media), I will be challenged to expand my understanding of key elements within the realm of cultural theory. Because of the unique nature of this MA program, courses are structured to support the unique research ambitions of students - giving me the opportunity to grow my theoretical knowledge base, but also tie it to my own focus on sound and society - rather than simply achieving a credential.

With this interdisciplinary program being designed to ground students in critical theories and methodologies across disciplinary boundaries, the Cultural, Social, and Political Thought major emphasizes the critical engagement of ideas and their manifestation in shifting cultural, social, and political contexts. In addition to the required reading for my coursework, I intend to seek out additional literature and case studies that investigate sound, noise, acoustic ecology, harmonic structure and conversational analysis - all in an effort towards developing my own theories and arguments in this important field of cultural and artistic study.

Writing: During my first year of coursework, I will have the opportunity to strengthen my academically-focused writing. By bringing the quality of my writing up to a more rigorously professional standard, I will have more opportunities to contribute to significant publications, such as academic journals, exhibition catalogs, monographs, and other prestigious forums within contemporary art practice.

TIMELINE

September - December 2019: Begin first academic term of coursework. Classes I have already registered for include:

- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5101- Research Methodology
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5701- Professional Skills Seminar
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5301 - Queering Feminism, Gender, and Power
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5303 - Critical Theory
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5305 - Postmodernism/Poststructuralism

January - April 2020: Begin second academic term of coursework. Classes I am intending to register for include:

- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5107 - Discourse Analysis
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5207 - Culture and History
- Cultural, Social, and Political Thought 5307 - Postcolonialism
- Anthropology 3900 - Psychological Anthropology
- Psychology 4850 - Cultural Organisms
- Sociology 4600 - Advanced Themes in Social Control: Policing and Social Surveillance

May - August 2020: Begin thesis work, conduct additional self-directed research, completing thesis proposal, begin writing first draft of thesis.

EXPECTED RESULTS AND BENEFITS

Over the past 10 years I have grown my career in the Alberta arts and culture sector through a variety of employment experience and independent projects. I aspire to take my career to the next level, moving past regional work towards a national profile and recognition.

There is now a significant expectation within the field of contemporary art that you must possess graduate-level education to qualify for a number of opportunities, regardless of the knowledge and experience you might hold. This is a significant obstacle to my own career progression and ambitions, and I feel in some ways that I have reached a “glass ceiling” that prevents future career development and employment opportunities to advance in the field.

Completing a masters degree would be invaluable to my future work opportunities, as this credential has now become a base level expectation for many job qualifications. Through completion of this MA program, I will not only achieve an important professional designation, but also build a larger professional network across the country within an academic context. I will be able to leverage these new relationships to create future opportunities in my field of work but also gain access to new circles of influence, such as the internationally-focused College Art Association, and other academically-embedded galleries and museums.

All of this research will lead to a strengthened position for my work as a curator and writer within the field of contemporary art. As an independent arts professional without full-time employment that offers institutional support and benefits - having time, space, and financial support is critical to developing new lines of thinking.

I have already been awarded the two largest scholarships that the University of Lethbridge awards for graduate students, so receiving additional support from the AFA would allow me to focus solely on my studies rather than having to take on additional outside work to make ends meet during my graduate studies. The AFA has seen the value of my work in the past, awarding me a grant in December 2019, and the AFA's continued support would greatly assist to enable the next step of my professional development. Building on previous support of my exhibition project towards a more focused curatorial practice would allow my work to have a more significant impact upon the Alberta arts community, and contribute towards the AFA's mandate of encouraging and supporting the arts as a significant contributor to quality of life in Alberta.

Drawing from my experience in both the theoretical and practical aspects of curatorial work, I believe that completing this Master of Arts in Cultural, Social, and Political Thought will enable me to grow and develop my career in significant and important ways. I am excited to develop a specific area of expertise that will help me enhance curatorial programming at contemporary art institutions in Alberta, Canada, and abroad, while advancing my career as an Alberta-based curator and writer.