

Sports Eat Arts
The Politics of Arts Funding in Light of the 2010 Winter Olympics
(And a Special Request to the Readership of *Search*)

Dániel Péter Biró

In the fall of 2009, the Provincial Government of British Columbia announced that it would make massive cuts to government arts funding in the province.¹

It seems ironic that, as governments around the world have increased arts funding to stimulate the economy, the government of B.C. has decided to slash arts funding in its present budget.²

This decision to cut arts funding comes just as the province prepares for the 2010 Winter Olympics Games in Vancouver. While the Olympics are presented by both governments and media as a festival of international brotherhood through sports, the games have become for many a spectacle that depletes communities of financial resources. Most recently, the government-sponsored festivities have become closely linked to authoritarian state practices: one only needs to recall the example of Beijing, where entire communities were displaced in order to allow the city to be transformed and sanitized, in order to accommodate the crowds of foreign visitors who paid large sums of money to attend.³

It is well documented that the recently re-elected government overspent on the coming Olympics.⁴ The government's recent cuts of provincial arts funding has been ironically juxtaposed with the commissioning of arts projects in conjunction with Olympic events. It would seem the government takes seriously the suggestion of Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic movement, that host nations present the "second pillar" of the Olympics, namely *culture*, by commissioning artists for designated "events" associated with the games.⁵ In light of the massive cuts to the arts, such

¹ While many estimates have valued the cuts at approximately half of current levels of spending, arts organizations have claimed that the cuts are actually much larger. According to the Alliance for Arts and Culture, "the cuts will be 85 percent for next year, and 92 percent after that." See *Alliance for Arts and Culture* [web site] (<http://www.allianceforarts.com/category/wordpress-tag/government>, October 16, 2009) accessed November 21, 2009.

² The U.S., German, and French governments have allocated extra funds for the arts in their recent budgets.

³ See Helen Lenskyj *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic power and Propaganda* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) as well as Christopher A. Shaw *Five Ring Circus: Myths and Realities of the Olympic Games* (Gabrola Island: New Society Publishers, 2009). Amnesty International has also reported extensively on human rights abuses in preparation to and during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. See "Chinese authorities' broken promises threaten Olympic legacy" *Amnesty International* [web site] (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/chinese-authorities-broken-promises-threaten-olympic-legacy-20080728>, July 28, 2008) accessed December 2, 2009.

⁴ <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/story.html?id=f2c1937a-a9d4-4eb6-9a29-2e5ff3746ea6> and Jeremy Hainsworth, "2010 Vancouver Olympics costing nearly \$104M more" in *Taiwan News* [web site] (http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=852600&lang=eng_news, January 31, 2009), accessed December 1, 2009, as well as <http://www.vancouvernews.com/business/Province+millions+2010+volunteers/1877383/story.html>, January 31, 2009), accessed December 2, 2009.

⁵ Jasmine Rezaee "Are the Vancouver 2010 Olympics responsible for B.C.'s missing arts funds?" *This Magazine* (<http://this.org/blog/2009/09/24/2010-vancouver-olympics-arts-funding/> September 24, 2009) accessed November 12, 2009. See Allan Antliff & Kim Crosswell "How We Torched the Torch" in

instrumentalization of the arts appears little more than a cynical joke.⁶ While artists in the province are forced to plan for a very uncertain economic future, the media-driven Olympic spectacle paints a picture of the arts as an important, cherished part of the games and British Columbia. Although millions have been spent on designated cultural "events" tied to the Olympic Festivities, it is been made completely clear to artists in the province that the present government only wants to use—not support—the arts. This became clear during the recent "Torch Relay" launch in Victoria with its accompaniment of commissioned music and lavish state-subsidized artistic events, while hundreds of artists protested on the sidelines.⁷

In re-allocating funding to artworks specifically tied to events like the Olympics, governments create strict conditions for artistic creation, thereby compromising the autonomy of artistic creation through the very connection with the event. This has become an international problem. In the present context of the 2010 Olympics, the arts become a tool for advertising the spectacle of a corporation-dominated sports event. Such "event-based" artistic creation comes to life as funding for artistic projects, normally adjudicated at arms-length (arts council adjudication by professional artists) is eliminated. In so doing, the B.C. Liberal government is pulling the wool over the eyes of the world, while simultaneously undermining cultural pluralism and destroying the cultural ecology of the province.

Streetnewz: (http://web.mac.com/bandcroft/Relative_Newz/Home.html, November, 2009) accessed November 28, 2009: "Though a Cultural Olympiad budget of about \$20 million has been set aside, Vancouver's art and culture landscape has only benefited minimally from Olympics funding. More importantly, the Olympics might even be responsible for the recent dramatic \$77 million arts and culture government cutback. Earlier this month the Direct Action Committee of the Alliance for Arts and Culture issued a press release stating that "the provincial government is planning to cut over 80% of what has consisted of only 1/20th of 1% of the provincial budget. No other provinces in Canada have reduced support for a sector that, according to government statistics, produces significant returns on investment." It is no surprise that the arts and culture community has always been seriously under-funded and often undervalued by policymakers. But the recent developments are startling.

⁶For more on the politics of the 2010 Cultural Olympiad see Tamsyn Burgmann, "Cuts-weary B.C. artists wary of clash with wealthy Olympic patron", in *Canadian Press* [web page]: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/canadianpress/article/ALeqM5iZFcJ7TfyfDWN5PMXdD4Es-hNgUw>.

⁷ Antliff & Crosswell, "Back home in Victoria, the Torch Relay was being coordinated by the *Greater Victoria Spirit Committee*, co-chaired by former Mayor Alan Lowe and Hugh MacDonald, executive director of SportHost Victoria. Details pertaining to community celebrations were delegated to an 'Olympic Torch Relay Task Force.' There were hints at economic downturns, recessions and the like. Originally, \$1,433,500 was budgeted for the celebration, but by Oct. 8, 2008 the Spirit Committee had scaled the figure down to \$765,000. In March 2009, the budget was further reduced to \$527,000, with \$276,000 dedicated to the 'Torch Relay Arrival Ceremony' on October 30th." On the other hand, in the midst of the world-wide recession, the Federal government ear-marked \$24.5 million towards torch relay events alone, half of which goes towards 'Celebration Communities.' The other \$12 million plus is being spent on organizing the relay, starting with the 'Arrival Ceremony' in Victoria. Not to be outdone, the B.C. government is also pitching in. After cutting provincial Arts Council Grants by 40% (\$7.6 million) last February, Tourism, Culture and the Arts Minister Kevin Krueger dedicated '\$3.5 million to help enhance local community celebrations across B.C. for the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay.' Who knows how much of these federal and provincial monies were spent on the Victoria ceremony—no final figure has been released. We do know that the *Greater Victoria Spirit Committee* requested and received a \$150,000 grant from the City of Victoria, plus city services during the event. Surrounding cities, including Oak Bay, North Saanich and Metchosis also poured money into the kick-off: Alan Lowe has requested \$5,000 from each municipality."

The concept of "cultural ecology" should be considered by members of the current government—a government that successfully introduced the "carbon tax" idea to British Columbia. Awareness of our serious environmental crisis had to be nurtured to pass this legislation. Historically considered, this was possible because concerned individuals in the '70s, '80s, and '90s had started a debate about reforming our society to become more ecologically "conscious." With time, this consciousness became part of our everyday discourse and today the need for a healthy ecology is factored into our education, economy, and infrastructure.

We need a similar change in the social treatment of the arts because the cultural ecology has been neglected—both in British Columbia and beyond. It is imperative for the health of society that citizens respect and value the thought and spirit infusing various forms of artistic creativity: society and the arts develop only when innovation is fostered.⁸

This is one of the central pillars of cultural diversity and a thriving cultural ecology.

Regarding the current Olympics-driven funding "crisis," one can see how environmental ecology relates to cultural ecology. Since its inception, there have been many promises of a "green" Olympics in 2010, and a number of environmentalists predicted that such an undertaking would pose serious challenges to ordinary modes of Olympic operation.⁹ The fact that Olympics logistics ended up ramming a major highway through a fragile ecosystem, destroying much in its wake, has exposed the hollowness of the "green games" commitment. And now, as the ecological health of British Columbia continues to decline, thanks in part to the Olympics, provincial cuts ensure that culture is dying along with it. Viewed in a larger perspective, the current decisions of the B.C. government look like an attempt to transform the cultural environment in British Columbia into something like that of the United States, where corporate-driven priorities have long had the upper hand.¹⁰ Provincial cuts will force innovative artists to either head for the cellar, leave for another Canadian province or immigrate. The only other choice is

⁸ Helmut Lachenmann has discussed the relationship between art, democracy and ecology in his lecture "Kunst und Demokratie," (Lecture held at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin during the seminar "Das Projekt Demokratie" on November, 8 2008). Helmut Lachenmann writes "So wie es offensichtlich zu einem gewissen Grad gelungen scheint, der Gesellschaft so etwas wie ein Umwelt-Bewußtsein zu vermitteln. – mit Rückschlägen natürlich – müßte es möglich sein und wäre es einen Versuch wert, ein die Worthülse des „mündigen Bürgers“ aufbrechendes reflektiertes Demokratieverständnis zu vermitteln in bewußtem Widerstand gegen das, was ich oben vereinfachend „Verblödung“ genannt hatte, und - als genau hier ansetzender Beitrag aus unserer Perspektive als Kunstschaffende - ein die Phantasie und den Intellekt elektrisierendes Bewußtsein für das, was den Begriff Kunst für uns alle so unverzichtbar macht." "In the same manner that a certain degree of success has been achieved—with setbacks, of course—in conveying a notion such as environmental consciousness within society, it should be possible to convey the notion of "mature citizen"; it would certainly be worth trying. This might open up a reflective understanding of democracy, one that would stand in deliberate opposition to what I earlier, somewhat simplistically, called 'stupefaction'; it might represent—in the sense of an applied contribution from our perspective as artists—opening up to the imagination and electrifying consciousness of the intellect, which allows the concept of art to be so vital for us all." (English translation by the author).

⁹ See Arlene Gregorius "Vancouver 2010: Going for Green?" in *BBC News* [web page] (September 10, 2009 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8176865.stm>) accessed December 3, 2009.

¹⁰ The Obama administration has made an attempt to change the culture of Arts funding in the U.S. See Brett Zongker "CAPITAL CULTURE: Obama drops cautious arts policy" in *Charlotte Observer.com* [web site] (<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/132/story/1097526.html>, Dec. 8, 2009) accessed December 9, 2009.

to transform artistic creativity into advertising that serves corporate or institutional sponsors.¹¹ The end result? Lacking the philanthropic safety-net that keeps American arts alive, artistic diversity in this province will diminish to the point of no return, and only the most standardized, corporate artistic endeavors will remain.¹²

Even in economic terms the current government decisions do not make much sense. Such artistic innovation is not only beneficial to the spirit but also, as studies show, to the economy.¹³ But beyond this, by cutting arts funding, a considerable part of the "cultural memory" in British Columbia will be lost. Without a strong sense of memory and pluralist tradition the existing cultural diversity will not be able survive. This will be disastrous for the cultural landscape of the province.

The health of a society is dependant on a strong cultural identity, an identity fueled by artistic innovation.¹⁴ What is happening in British Columbia can happen today or tomorrow in any other region of the world. Therefore I request the readership of *Search* to take action and write a letter of protest to the government of British Columbia. The Alliance for Arts and Culture website has such a letter prepared especially for those who wish to make their voices heard:

<http://www.allianceforarts.com/speak-out-about-bc-arts-cuts>

For concerned citizens outside of Canada please send an email to the Office of the Premiere of British Columbia:

premier@gov.bc.ca

I thank you for your time and action.

¹¹ Ottawa has recently increased Federal Arts funding to \$504 million. See "News and Views," *The Arts Board of Saskatchewan* [web site] (http://www.artsboard.sk.ca/News/Archives/Headline%20Briefs/news_headline_briefs_archive.shtml, Dec. 1, 2009) accessed December 1, 2009.

¹² Some recent decisions of the Federal Government of Canada also mirror this trend. Cuts to the Canada Council's Grants for Specialized Music Sound Recording and Grants for Specialized Music Distribution were announced by the Government in the fall of 2009 and are currently being challenged. See "Heritage Committee calls for reversal of cuts to diversity program" in *Canada Views* [Web Page] (<http://www.canadaviews.ca/2009/12/08/heritage-committee-calls-for-reversal-of-cuts-to-diversity-program/>, December, 8, 2009) accessed December 5, 2009.

¹³ See Charlie Smith, "B.C. Liberals hammer the arts" in *Straight.Com* (<http://www.straight.com/article-254230/bc-liberals-whack-arts>, September 2, 2009) accessed December 6, 2009.

¹⁴ It is clear that, even before these cuts, the annual arts spending in British Columbia did not even come close to government arts spending in other Canadian provinces.