

SWEET SIXTEEN

An amble through the history of the
Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society

by Kevin Allen



alberta media arts alliance – society

Dedicated to:
Helen, Grant, Pamela & Gordon
Spirit, Mind, Body & Soul respectively

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The Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society engages in promotion,
education and advocacy on behalf of Alberta's media artists.



Origins

Going back to the beginning is an important task. Not only does it remind us of ground we have covered - initiatives undertaken - but it also tutors us in the realities of the present. We all have effects on the worlds we inhabit, and in the process of creation, we provide a legacy for the future. What are you and your colleagues doing now that might be written about sixteen years hence?

Our story begins with a handful of like-minded souls in like-minded film and video production organizations who thought up the Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society (amaas). It didn't happen all at once mind you, but over time the form crystallized in the registration of Alberta Non-Profit Society #50458858. Her birth date was March 20th, 1991. (Her astrological sign: Sun in Pisces, Moon in Taurus, rising sign indeterminate - but I would bet on something fiery like Leo – a mixture of dreamy, steady and sporadically willful.) Each founder brought their particular aspirations to these beginnings, and like so many human creations their intents wove themselves forward through time.

“FAVA was basically a closet for broken gear. Later when Liz Stobbe arrived to work at FAVA, there was a maturing of the organization, and that was when a political awareness began as well.” - Tim Folkmann

1991 was the formal beginning of the society but amaas was gestating before that, as early as 1985. The Calgary and Edmonton media arts communities in the early 80's did not think about each other overmuch. Despite their relative proximity, the film and video co-ops were a new kind of cultural organization on the prairies, and only beginning to build the organizational foundations of what they would become.

A pivotal moment in the formation of amaas came in the form of the 1989 Hinton Independent Film and Video Festival¹. Organized by Brent Spiess, the Festival was a showcase for Alberta film and video as well as a networking opportunity for administrators, artists and the general public, including the high-profile presence of then Alberta Minister of Culture and Multiculturalism, Doug Main.

¹ This was the first and only Hinton Film and Video Festival.

As the festival came to a close, there was a meeting organized between representatives of the production co-ops present: FAVA, CSIF, EMMEDIA, and QAS. The topic on their minds was the recently established Alberta Film and Video Arts Fund (AFVAF) as a lottery funded allocation. The fund, which they had lobbied for, was now the agency supporting the co-ops, and it was thought that political action might be necessary for its continued existence. The name “Alberta Media Arts Alliance” was conceived and that September, Grant Poier penned the first of many lobbying letters to the Culture Minister in support of the AFVAF.

Incorporation

amaas remained an informal association of personalities and relationships over the next 18 months, but as more conversations were had - and bottles of wine consumed - a growing sense of traction and potential was felt.

Various feelers had been sent out to government officials about funding this new organization and it gradually became apparent that a provincial umbrella organization could have a significant impact on Alberta’s media arts community. Alberta Culture expressed interest in funding the organizing meetings. The Canada Council was considering a Prairie Distribution Initiative proposal that would see contract artists roam the province in search of film and video to distribute. Furthermore, the upcoming national Independent Film and Video Alliance (now Independent Media Arts Alliance) conference in Calgary that June was being hosted by CSIF and EMMEDIA. They had never before worked so collaboratively, and FAVA as a northern neighbour was stepping up to help.

In February 1991, Liz Stobbe and Rick Gustavsen from FAVA travelled to Calgary, where they joined Brian Rusted, Ian Reid and Grant Poier from EMMEDIA and Marcella Bienvenue from CSIF. They were meeting to talk about the nuts and bolts of turning amaas into a non-profit society. Over two days at EMMEDIA (and one evening at Marcella’s) the amaas founders hashed out objectives, bylaws and plans for the future.

Marcella thought that amaas could be an effective lobbying force for increasing production funding. Rick was concerned about the co-ops’ relationship with the Alberta Motion Picture Industry Association (AMPIA) and believed amaas could be the industry-alternative voice needed by the media arts community. Liz enthused that the spirit of the co-ops was unique and unified despite cultural differences between the centres. Grant was convinced that amaas would be the vehicle for better communication between the centres and a source of solidarity.

“We did not know all of the time where we were going, but we were going to try it, ask questions, and be provocateurs. It seemed like fresh territory.” – Grant Poier

Once the visions were condensed to shared objectives, logistics were determined, such as board structure, consensus-based decision making, the timing of the fiscal year, and membership dues. CSIF, EMMEDIA and FAVA considered themselves the founding members. Perhaps a portent of membership issues to come, a register of media arts groups was created whom would be invited to join amaas. The short-list were those centres who received AFVAF funding:

North West Media Network Guild, Edmonton
Fundamental Film and Video Society, Grand Prairie
Pincher Creek Film Society, Pincher Creek
Quickdraw Animation Society, Calgary
Interdisciplinary Artists Promotion and Production Society of Alberta (Inter D), Calgary.

Edmonton’s Metro Cinema, later to become a key amaas member centre, was invited to submit an organizational profile, for future member consideration.

Tasks were divided, documents signed: Liz through FAVA agreed to do the financial administration for the first year, and file the society papers – 44 days later a society was born.

Breaking in the new legs/a few eggs

In 1991 one of the first tasks on the to-do list was the writing of a parallel study to the recently completed AMPIA industry study report. Grant Poier was commissioned to do the primary research, pen the report and create a series of recommendations for the government.

In March, a questionnaire was sent out to the amaas member centres for speedy turnaround, and by May the report, *The Media Arts in Alberta Culture*, was completed. Largely an exercise in self-definition for the media arts community, the report also made some bold recommendations including: increasing public support for the media arts to 1.25 million dollars, multi-year operational funding for amaas member centres, media arts community representation on the newly formed Alberta Foundation for the Arts board, and peer juries in the granting process.

Throughout 1992 and 1993, the arts community began to get uneasy at the speed of changes within the provincial government. After the 1993 Provincial Election, and the beginning of Ralph Klein's tenure as Premier, Alberta Culture was absorbed into the Ministry of Community Development. amaas had managed to only secure a dribble of operation funding, \$4000, and hopes in accessing promising new monies from a federal/provincial fund called the Cultural Industries Agreement Office, never materialized.²

Compounding this, a lack of official government response to The Media Arts in Alberta Culture report caused tensions to emerge regarding the role that amaas should play in the province. Should amaas be the body that vets potential media arts jury members? Could amaas be the actual funding body for the media arts community? Is the consensus model viable, particularly when the member centres were having troubles divorcing their own interests from those of the provincial community?

Funding cutbacks at the Canada Council further challenged trust between the centres as they competed for shrinking pools of operations funding.³

² amaas' attempt to access this fund was a marketing and research development project called *Moving Images, Ideas and Information*, also written by Grant Poier.

³ FAVA lost Canada Council video operations and equipment funding in 1993. Other production centres faced smaller cuts.

Moreover, amaas was troubled, even creating strife within member centre boards. Film versus video, Calgary versus Edmonton: issues of representation on the amaas board of directors tested the young society's existence. Despite these growing pains, amaas gained two members, Metro Cinema and the Aboriginal Filmmakers of Alberta (a.k.a. Dreamspeakers).⁴

As 1993 drew to a close, pressures began to alleviate somewhat. amaas made a conscious choice not to be the provincial funding body for the media arts, despite government pressures to do so. The 1993-94 amaas operating grant from the AFA was fully funded at \$10,000, and a series of media arts symposia were planned for the upcoming year.⁵

“We did not want to become part of the bureaucracy but wanted to offer input – we wanted to be an advisory body. It seemed like the government was trying to offload arts funding through us – we thought it was part of their job.” - Grant Poier

The development of symposia marked a new period for amaas. Tom Andriuk was the contract organizer for the second symposium, *On-Line Independence: Forging New Distribution Models* that took place at the newly minted Night Gallery (formerly White Elephant) in Calgary on May 28, 1994. It was so organized that the amaas Annual General Meeting would follow the next day.⁶

Gathering at the symposia reminded amaas members of their shared interests. But what dramatically renewed their sense of solidarity was the Provincial Government's flirtation with censorship. The Minister of Community Development at the time, Gary Mar, had told the media that artists and arts organizations could expect funding refusals for projects that did not meet “community standards.”

The now infamous community standards debate mobilized the arts community. amaas played its part by producing a video letter that was sent

⁴ The Fundamental Film and Video Society in Grand Prairie and the Pincher Creek Film Society were never actively involved in amaas, and soon after this disbanded. Dreamspeakers was involved in the 90's only intermittently.

⁵ amaas member centre North West Media Network, a women's video production organization located in Edmonton, decided to fold at their April 8, 1994 AGM due to lack of operational funding.

⁶ At the AGM the decision was made to apply for IFVA membership. amaas joined the IFVA in June 1994.



widely to politicians and the media. In the video, a series of media artists and administrators⁷ gave impassioned statements in defence of artistic freedom and arm's length arts funding.

Censorship notwithstanding, amaas continued to chew on the issue of distribution of Alberta media art. amaas engaged CSIF member Nowell Berg, and his company Market Insight, to produce a distribution report. In January 1995, the amaas centres disseminated the distribution survey to their memberships. The report concluded that Alberta media artists were increasingly interested in having a computer bulletin board, or an electronic media arts network across Alberta. Moreover, the report recommended that amaas perhaps even pursue the latest electronic development of the day, “an InterNet or World Wide Web site.”

1995 was a year of reflection and turnover. New staff at many of the co-ops mirrored many of the new faces around the amaas table. It was rather peaceable until the fall, when the Provincial Government launched its latest cultural innovation, the dismantling of the AFA.

To PASO or not to PASO

On September 30th, 1995, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts gathered most of the provincial arts organizations together for a hush-hush Saturday meeting to tell them that “the winds of change” were blowing. As of April 1st, 1996 there would only be one grant per arts sector.⁸ The stunned arts organization representatives were then directed into break out meetings according to discipline so that they could strategize their own merging process, with AFA officers at hand to facilitate as needed. The new funded entities would be called Provincial Arts Service Organizations (PASOs), and there would be eight.

⁷The artists in the video included: Nowell Berg, Karen Walton, Lisa Trofimova, Grant Poier, Malcolm Parker, Mandy Johnston, Jim Goertz, Michael Willis, Cori Stent, Sandra Law, and Russell Mulvay.

⁸There were eight disciplines defined: dance, music, theatre, literary arts, visual arts, craft, touring and cultural industries.

“The ‘symposium’ was planned as a membership think tank to discuss issues at the time: distribution, funding and censorship being the hot topics. I think during the discussions everyone got charged and Nowell Berg had the idea to make a tape and send it to the media.” - Tom Andriuk

It was a confusing time, and Provincial cultural policy changed frequently. When challenged weeks later, Community Development Minister Gary Mar confirmed that the government intended to abolish the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. The eight provincial arts organizations would be funded by a new amalgamated 'quality of life' foundation and local funding of arts organizations would be devolved to regional volunteer lottery boards comprised of municipal groups.⁹

The media arts had been overlooked in the restructuring process, partly because the size of the member centres was relatively small, and partly because amaas had never received provincial operating funding, only project grants. However, increasing the profile for the media arts community was one of the reasons for amaas' existence, and when pressed the government unofficially admitted there had been an oversight and said that amaas had two choices:

1. To request the AFA add Media Arts as a PASO discipline in which case amaas would receive the total Film/Video Organizations Funds to distribute among its members (déjà vu); or
2. To request the AFA transfer the Film/Video funding envelope to AMPIA to distribute the money to the centres through the newly forming Cultural Industries PASO.

Clearly, amaas and the Alberta Media Arts community had a decision to make. A well-attended amaas general meeting in Red Deer concluded that they would prefer option #1, and President Jim Goertz drafted the letter to the AFA President that same November evening.

The PASO drama continued to unfold over the next year, with many government about-faces and strong critiques from the Alberta cultural community.

Michael Willis the AMAAS President in 1996 explored the many nuances of what AMAAS PASOdom would mean, writing thorough tracts on the politics of the day, as well as meeting with public servants at the AFA and with the new Minister of Community Development, Shirley McClellan.

Helen Folkmann, the relatively new FAVA representative on the AMAAS board, was already weaving her political information network, and discovered that the AFA was eliminating peer juries for centre operation grants. More interestingly she had heard that the new Minister was considering slowing down devolution of the AFA. Concurrently, amaas and the member centres were learning about the Internet, and beginning to conceptualize the beginnings of new media as an artform. In the summer of 1996, amaas hired Sheila Urbanoski, who was EMMEDIA's program coordinator at the time, to create its first website.

By December 1996, the AFA accepted amaas as the ninth PASO and invited the society to apply for operation funding at the next grant deadline, April 1, 1997. However, the government had done an about face by this time, deciding that funding for arts disciplines would not be delegated to the PASOs, effectively saving the AFA.

The problem of having money...

1997 and 1998 proved to be challenging years administratively for amaas as it made the transition into becoming a PASO. When the society lived on air and activism, the financial crumbs it came across were easily designated to a smallish project or meeting expenses. Now with \$30,000 from its first-ever operating grant, amaas - ironically - began to struggle.

"The tone of the time was positive but frustrating. We had had so little in the way of financial wherewithal; there was no opportunity to think big. In that transitional stage, I had a feeling that we were not a real group - I mean we were still the delegates from these individual groups lobbying in the best interests of our individual centres, but the true picture of a provincial voice had not established itself." - Michael Willis

Increased resources put a strain on the already busy amaas board members, who generally were running their own media arts centres: financial records had gone missing, the web contract had been overpaid, and the site had yet to be seen - there was talk of legal action against the webmaster.

⁹ A development that ultimately never materialized.

In response to these issues, a three-year business plan was created. Yet, the amaas board made the strategic decision to be administratively light. amaas was philosophically opposed to creating another layer of bureaucracy in an increasingly uncertain funding climate. All projects would be funneled through member centres to collectively address amaas' needs. Five projects were created, one for each member centre:

- FAVA was to produce a promotional video about the media arts in Alberta.
- EMMEDIA would design an amaas logo and develop a brochure
- Quickdraw would take another stab at web site development
- CSIF would present a provincial independent media art conference
- Metro Cinema was to curate an Alberta media art program for touring purposes.

As the administrative side of amaas struggled, the advocacy wing was taking off. With Helen Folkmann as Vice-President, amaas was in the political thick of things, with both the AFA and Ministry of Community Development. Moreover she had gotten herself elected onto the board of the national IFVA.

“Helen was such a powerhouse, a real political animal, she loved fights and jumping in the fray. She was not afraid of controversy or hurting people’s feelings. Forthrightness forced amaas to grow up a little bit, play hardball with each other. She was serious about it.”
– Tim Folkmann

However, by the end of 1998, there were some doubts about the efficacy of amaas as an organization. The lack of an administrative infrastructure was causing accountability problems. CSIF had started to plan a media arts conference at Sylvan Lake, but cancelled plans when amaas was unable to answer budget questions or confirm financing.

Other amaas projects appeared to be inordinately delayed: board meetings had a subtext of awkwardness – there were elephants in the room no one would mention. All the while the balance sheet was gradually increasing with unspent operations monies. Thankfully amaas' fortunes were about to change...

We are going to party like it's 1999

1999 was a turning point for amaas: a year when many initiatives came together. The first *Prairie Tales*, two packages of Alberta film and video curated by Metro Cinema's Bill Evans, was completed and toured around the province to much acclaim. An artist whose work was featured in the program often accompanied each *Prairie Tales* presentation.

In the spring amaas faced an issue that caused significant debate. Member centre EMMEDIA humbly petitioned the amaas board for a short-term loan of \$15,000 to cover a cash flow crunch due to delayed renovations in their space. Members were worried about setting a dangerous precedent, but at the end of the day the board decided that the request was indeed both earnest and unique, and granted the money. In an ironic twist to the deliberations, the amaas money arrived late to EMMEDIA, and by that time their money troubles had worked themselves out.

amaas, with its relatively deep pockets, decided to subsidize the travel of a second delegate from each member centre to network at the national IFVA conference that June in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The resulting Alberta wave in the Maritimes was striking, and one of the consequences was FAVA's successful bid for the 2000 IFVA conference to be hosted in Edmonton.

However the most exciting development of 1999 was the successful execution of the first amaas media arts conference in Drumheller. In the 1980s and early 1990s there had been a biannual media arts “Plains Conference” which had ended due to lack of funding and was sorely missed. The amaas conference was hoped to be the descendent of this tradition.

The conference registration poster, replete with clip-art tyrannosaurus, attracted 60 media artists from the five member centres, who descended on the world heritage site/tourist town. Interested artists from the New University Television Society (NUTV) and Women in Film and Television were also in attendance, in addition to the new film/video officer from the AFA, Jane Bisbee, who was actively trying to mend relationships between the AFA and the media arts community.

Ironically, conference organizer Helene Wheeler from CSIF, never made it to Drumheller due to a minor car accident on the outskirts of Calgary. At least one marriage came out of that weekend meeting-of-the-tribes, and many quirky conference stories are still circulating to this day.

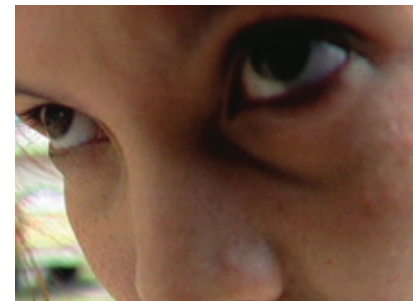
It can be argued that the Drumheller conference had a profound effect on the future of the organization, as it became evident that amaas could have a relevance to individual media artists. The AFA increased funding to amaas in 2000 by 20% to \$36,000. Moreover, individual media artists said they wanted to participate in the electoral process at amaas general meetings, and were interested in becoming more informed about amaas activities.

At the 2000 AGM in Edmonton, many observers from the member centres attended, and challenges were presented to the amaas board about how it selected delegates and the voting protocols. Up until that point there was an elected Executive, in addition to one delegate from each member centre, plus an alternate delegate, for a total of fourteen individuals. Concerns were voiced: could amaas represent all media artists, how was Calgary and Edmonton representation to be balanced, are proxy votes accepted, why did amaas have so much operational money it never spent?

This drama, although superficially distressing, was also a positive development – the media arts community was reengaging with its PASO. For several years getting volunteers to constitute the amaas board had been difficult. Even with the system of alternate delegates, dodging amaas board meetings had become commonplace, and being the amaas member centre delegate was seen as a tour of duty.

At the 2000 AGM, the decision was made to revert to a literal reading of the society's by-laws - one centre, one vote. Further, there was an explicit instruction that the amaas board rethink its processes to become more relevant to the media arts community.

"I think my favourite amaas memory was that very first conference, even though we did not have a whole lot of stuff to do and the hotel was not very good, it was the first time I met so many people outside of Metro - it was a lot of fun, realizing there were so many artists in Alberta."
- Joel Mandel.



The national IFVA conference was held in Edmonton in the summer of 2000. amaas helped to underwrite some of the expenses, and many Alberta media artists attended as observers. The appetite for conferences was stoked, and during the national conference EMMEDIA agreed to produce the 2nd amaas conference in Red Deer the following spring. By the end of the year NUTV had joined amaas, the first new member centre in seven years.

The AFA was working on changes (yet again) to its funding structure. Some juries were eliminated as the media arts production centres were all put on formula operational grants. In addition the organizational project grant program was scrapped. Furthermore there were complex changes to the amount of funding allocated for individual film and video artist project grants.

The kicker, however, was that PASOs would now get a minimum \$50,000 grant plus 50% of all project expenses. Plus there was an additional \$11,000 in extra money given to amaas, in a one-time allocation if amaas could come up with a justification for its use. The amaas board members were conflicted. They were happy to see amaas get increased PASO funding – it was by far the lowest funded of the nine PASOs. Yet, it was also felt that this increase in funding was coming at the expense of the member centres, whom they also represented.

In a somewhat cynical gesture amaas decided to flow through the extra monies to the member centres in early 2001: each of the six centres would get \$3000 for an amaas sponsored project completely of their own discretion.¹⁰ It is hard to say whether the AFA even noticed.

Deus Ex Administrata

During 2001 and 2002, amaas began to mature and professionalize. Metaphorical game hunters were tackling the elephants in the room - historical problems and misunderstandings were worked out. The Red Deer “In-Sight” Conference, personally organized by Diane Dickert,

¹⁰FAVA supported 2 scholarships to its annual 3 month video production course, Quickdraw presented a Visiting Artist series, NUTV sponsored the beginning of a new film school, Metro Cinema presented 12 Frameworks programs, CSIF supported a 1 year Artist in Residence, EMMEDIA supported a visiting multi media Artist in Residence.

EMMEDIA's Executive Director, added a critical dimension to the conference. Attended by 80 individuals, there were featured screenings, discussions on funding, and an in-depth workshop/visioning session meant to identify future amaas priorities, initiatives and endeavours.

Prairie Tales 3 was screened during the conference, and had been screened in eleven other Alberta communities prior. *Prairie Tales*, not being a one-off project, was a huge credibility booster for amaas. Not only had the program been gaining momentum in its third season, but it was also a “gold star” project, meeting amaas’ primary objective of increasing the profile and respect of media art throughout the province, particularly outside Calgary and Edmonton.

Helen Folkmann became amaas President and with an invigorated executive laid the groundwork for an administrative infrastructure. amaas went on a targeted spending spree, producing a \$20,000 deficit budget with the aim to reduce some of their accumulated surplus.

In 2001, Tom Andriuk pitched amaas a web server project in partnership with Calgary's Webcore Labs Inc. The purchased computer hardware was able to act as the server for all amaas member centres' web needs including high-speed internet access, video streaming, and web site hosting. Furthermore amaas hired a Webmaster directly (not through a member centre contract) to design and post biweekly updates to its website.

The server project created a very tangible service to its member centres ultimately reducing their own administrative burdens. Consequently, this kind of organizational momentum attracted new members. The herland Film and Video Festival joined in July 2001, and BEAMS, the Boreal Electro Acoustic Music Society, in March 2002. Membership policies were developed as interest grew.

In addition, the amaas board rewrote its organizational by-laws to address the critique of needing more artist representation. It was decided that the President of amaas would be elected democratically by all of the delegates present at the Annual amaas Conference, with the rest of the executive elected as per amaas convention, from the pool of member centre representatives on the board.

amaas made the transition, at this time, to have an administrative structure. In March 2002, the amaas board of directors approved and budgeted for the hiring of a part-time Executive Director as well as monies for renting an office in Edmonton. The job posting, deadline April 10, 2002, sought, “an energetic ‘people’ person with a vision for taking a growing organization in new directions.”

Helen Folkmann stepped down as President of the society in order to enter the job competition. She was one of fifteen applicants, and with her extensive knowledge and passion for the Alberta media arts community, was short-listed and then offered the position. By early May, amaas had opened a small, but functional, office in the Birks building.

Moving out of the Calgary-Edmonton corridor

In 2002, Metro Cinema organized the 3rd amaas conference in Lethbridge, with the help of Southern Alberta Art Gallery’s Karin Champion, for the May long weekend. The conference participants were housed in the quirkily designed Lethbridge Community College. There were workshops on videostreaming and copyrighting, artist talks from locals Michael Campbell and Brian McKenna and *Prairie Tales 4* screened. It was the ongoing hope of amaas that hosting the conferences outside of Calgary and Edmonton might seed a new member centre, and Lethbridge seemed to be ripe for a production co-op. Not only was it a University town, but also had many practicing media artists.

The Lethbridge conference also elected the first “Artist President,” from amongst the delegates. Tom Andriuk, program director of NUTV and long time EMMEDIA member was acclaimed to the position. It seemed the windy Southern Alberta town was gustily cheering the society on.

By having an active President and an energetic Executive Director, amaas’ productivity notably increased. A new three-year business plan was developed, other sources of revenue were explored and there was an amaas presence at numerous arts community events and community consultations. The amaas web server was being used by more centres, and notably supported EMMEDIA’s “Activist Menu: Compression Camp,” an activist response to the Kananaskis G8 conference.

Also during the summer of 2002, the amaas website was overhauled, and amaas supported a three-day outdoor screening of Alberta media art at Fort MacLeod’s South Country Fair.

The Medicine Hat Film Festival discovered amaas and applied for membership. This represented the first group outside of Calgary and Edmonton since the society’s founding. Not only were they quickly accepted as members, but were invited to be the host city of the 2003 amaas conference, a move intended to cement the relationship.

The AFA asked amaas to apply in a grant competition to produce a summer media arts camp, similar to which many other PASOs undertook within their own artistic disciplines. Despite an interesting hybrid approach whereby FAVA, CSIF and EMMEDIA would manage separate components of the course, Red Deer College was ultimately the successful applicant.

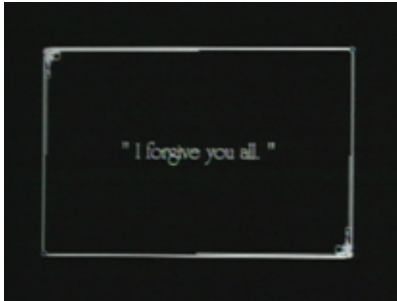
In the fall of 2003, amaas decided on a second round of grants to its member organizations. This time each of the nine centre received \$2000 to spend on self-defined, “artist support program.” However, there was the tacit understanding as the number of amaas members increased, the likelihood of future flow-through grants was going to be diminished.

It was also at this time that Helen announced that she would be leaving the newly created amaas staff position at the end of the calendar year. The public reason was to pursue her own independent artistic projects, however privately she confided to some of her peers that she had, heartbreakingly, been diagnosed with cancer.

Pearls and Hitches

February 2003 was significant month for amaas. Firstly, the AFA announced an increase in operational funding to \$75,000/annum, with a verbal commitment to keep funding at that level for three years.

Secondly, EMMEDIA hosted the Prairie Regional IFVA meeting in Calgary: a gathering referred to as the PEARL convergence. The acronym stood for Prairie Exchange Artist Resource List, and one of the outcomes of the conference was to increase the likelihood for visiting artists to move between Prairie centres. In addition there was a well-attended round table discussion exploring the notion of the existence of a “Prairie Aesthetic” in the region’s media art.



Thirdly on February 20, 2003, the amaas Board's Hiring Committee concluded its interviews and offered the position of Executive Director to Roger Breault, an Edmonton communications and fundraising consultant. It was hoped that Roger, a relative outsider to the media arts community would be able to build new alliances with outside organizations and add a fresh perspective to the somewhat self-absorbed realm of PASO politics.

The amaas conference held in Medicine Hat that May was self-produced. No longer a contract for a member centre to administrate, amaas hired Medicine Hat Film Festival member, Nicole Lapointe to oversee the conference logistics, while the amaas office took care of all the other details. The conference, as per its track record, was a success: screening *Prairie Tales 5*, bringing in visiting born-in-Alberta-now-New-York media artist Don Ritter, and electing Edmonton filmmaker Eva Colmers to the amaas Presidency.

At the conference, several artists and administrators began to express their dissatisfaction with Roger as amaas' Executive Director. The relationship between him and the media arts community had never gelled and there was a growing sense of awkwardness.

Membership criteria reemerged as a discussion item as several film festivals came petitioning for membership. The paying of artist fees was a matter of debate, and an associate member class was created for festivals who did not pay artists directly. In a measure of goodwill, it was decided that associate members would still have access to the amaas web and video servers.

At the September amaas board meeting, membership applications from the Global Visions Film Festival in Edmonton, the Calgary International Film Festival (CIFF), and the Seven Minute Film Festival in Canmore were tabled. Global Visions, now headed by Helen Folkmann, became a full member, CIFF an associate member, and the Seven Minute FF decided to postpone its membership application for a future meeting. Although not present, AMPIA had expressed interest in joining amaas as an associate member as well.

Roger laid the groundwork for the 2004 amaas conference to be held in Grand Prairie, finding a local exhibition group, the Grand Prairie Film Series, and tentatively booking the local community college as the conference venue. Perhaps sensing his untenable long-term relationship with the society, he tendered his resignation that fall, triggering the third Executive Director hiring committee in 16 months.

Pamtastik

By the end of 2003 Pamela Anthony was ensconced as the new amaas Executive Director. There was a palpable sense of relief, combined with hopeful assurance that amaas staffing had been settled for the time being. Early feedback from members was positive: communication, which had been stilted with Roger, was vastly improved.

Dreamspeakers, which had been on a five-year festival hiatus, officially became an amaas member again. The aboriginal film festival had been maintaining a diminished existence as a component of the Global Visions Film Festival, and in 2004 was gearing up to re-launch as an autonomous festival for 2005.

With 12 members, amaas had doubled its membership in just two years. As so many new people were sitting around the boardroom table, novel initiatives began to emerge. Melody Jacobson, amaas Treasurer and CSIF Coordinator of Operations introduced the idea of a critical writing project, which would include writing workshops and an eventual publication about Alberta media art.

In a similarly innovative vein, amaas nominated artist Gil Cardinal for the Governor General's Award for Media Art. Although he was not the successful award recipient, the Canada Council for the Arts was pleased that an amaas nomination was received and encouraged future submissions.

Advocacy initiatives were maintained, and interventions filed as appropriate. There was always the ongoing tussle with the AFA, and the Alberta Government, but internally tensions developed between amaas and member centre EMMEDIA. Regional concerns had re-emerged as an issue, and EMMEDIA lobbied behind the scenes for stronger Calgary representation in amaas, including a thrust for an amaas satellite office to be created in the Stampede City.

Broadly, however, there was not the will to create a duplicate administrative infrastructure. Perhaps indirectly addressing this development, amaas President Eva Colmers initiated several board sub-committees to deal with the society's growing output, and multi-city conference calls became a de rigueur mode of doing business.

Gravity

43 submissions were received for the 2004 edition of *Prairie Tales* and artists from Calgary and Edmonton met to select and curate the program. It screened that May at the amaas conference in Grand Prairie. Wittily titled, "Media and Energy" the conference, like an oil sands development, broke new ground by being located north of Edmonton. Moreover it was the first conference that commissioned artists. There was a sound and video installation by Laura Kavanaugh and Ian Birse, Tom Andriuk presented his sculptural media art piece, *Utopia*, and filmmaker Bernice Morin screened a copy of her documentary work in progress about renewable resources.

That fall, Eva Colmers sent out this message on the amaas e-mail distribution list:

In Remembrance of Helen Folkmann,
who passed away September 24, 2004.
She is dearly missed.

It is with great sadness that I inform you that filmmaker, media artist, arts advocate, former amaas executive director and dear friend Helen Folkmann passed away last weekend, after a brave battle with cancer. At a later time, we will post a more comprehensive message and information about a planned farewell celebration on the amaas website.

Take good care,
Eva

A remembrance celebration was held for Helen in early October and a convoy from Calgary's media arts community travelled north to pay their respects arriving to a packed Edmonton community hall. Quite the party - with artwork, performances, laughter and tears - amaas and Metro Cinema board member Marsh Murphy, made rounds of the hall ministering therapeutic doses of scotch to anyone whose mood became too heavy. Folkmann's 'tribe' continued the evening around an all night fire at the house of a friend.

The year concluded with a successful amaas intervention into Alberta Scene, the National Arts Centre's biannual festival of regional art, culture, and performance. 2005 was Alberta's turn to be in the spotlight; unfortunately media art had somehow slipped under the radar of Alberta Scene organizers. Pamela, asserting media art onto the national stage, found a partner in the Canadian Film Institute, and spearheaded a speedy call for media art submissions. Of 90 works submitted, a jury selected two shorts programs featuring 27 pieces in total, and a who's who of active media artists in the Province.

"A highlight for me was when we went to Ottawa for the Alberta Scene/Albertaine. We all sent letters as there had been no call for filmmakers, it was focused on performing arts exclusively; we just were not considered. I was really proud we set that precedent." - Eva Colmers

Repetition enlightenment

The 2005 amaas conference in Banff was chock full of programming. There were high profile visitors such as the Head of the Canada Council Media Arts Section, David Poole, and keynote speaker, Tom Sherman. University of Regina academic and editor David Garneau launched the first amaas critical writing publication, *Lost in Translation: Writing on Prairie Tales 7*, a collection of work from seven Alberta writers. Edmonton film devotee, and Metro Cinema Executive Director, Joel Mandel was elected amaas President.

In a fresh conference development, Richard Reeves and Aaron Munson instructed a Super 8 film production workshop; conference delegates throughout the weekend could be seen scampering through the pines, shooting anything that moved. The conference also forged links with

Banff artists, like the well-known video artist Sara Diamond, and with the Banff New Media Institute (BMNI). Key BNMI staff gave conference participants an insider's look at the advanced digital science poised to influence media art of the future.

The amaas Board in previous months had been developing the "Spirit of Helen" award, a cash prize to be given annually to a deserving member of the Alberta media arts community. In Banff, the first award was given to Grant Poier, who after 25 years of active participation in the media arts community was something of an institution - in the kindest sense. The second award, in 2006, was given to filmmaker and arts advocate Sandi Somers.

amaas, after 16 years as a non-profit, had institutionalized as well. There were cosmetic changes, assuredly. For example, new members joined: the Fairytales International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Calgary, the Calgary Underground Film Festival, the Edmonton International Film Festival; as old members drifted: the Medicine Hat Film Festival and the Calgary International Film Festival.

However given its history of uneven output, the delivery today of an annual conference, the showcasing of artists' work through *Prairie Tales*, the offering of regular workshops, the provision of web services, and ongoing provincial arts advocacy is noteworthy¹¹. Enough organizational momentum has been created that the amaas board has begun to shift towards governance and self-reflection.

"Communication is the most important and critical part of amaas. The conference is important, the idea of showcasing the community to itself. It's also important to keep facing the government. When I am working on advocacy, it sometimes seems illusionary, but the AFA and the government do think that we are a united force. And in many ways, we are. - Pamela Anthony

In the background, the Alberta Government continues to be fickle with its arts funding, but as the PASOs matured they have found a common voice. amaas was a leader in a comprehensive lobby effort that led to a substantial increase to the PASO grant program in 2006.

¹¹The 2006 Conference took place in Olds; the 2007 conference is slated for Lethbridge.

Ultimately, a present day analysis would find that amaas churns out genuinely valuable stuff. The networking and professional development functions of the organization are vital. However, does institutionalization equal fossilization? The passion of the early days seems difficult to recapture. Manifestos, demands for millions in funding, and video protest letters seem antiquated in the present. There is a new generation of media artists and arts administrators who have different goals and contours. Is amaas their vehicle? amaas' challenge is to stay limber and relevant.¹²

Conclusion

Ambling through the history of the Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society, one notices several elements. The first is the parallel history being recorded in this text: that of the Alberta Government, particularly the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. The AFA has redefined its role and funding policies on a regular basis since its inception, and shifts in Government priorities continue to drain energy away from program and service goals.

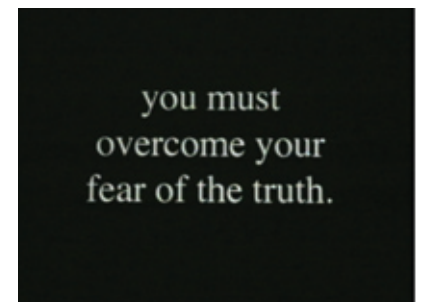
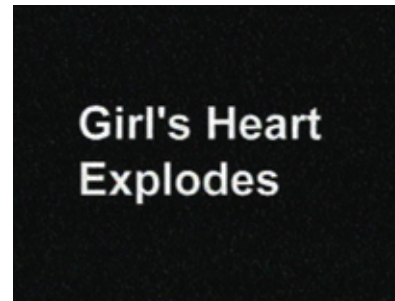
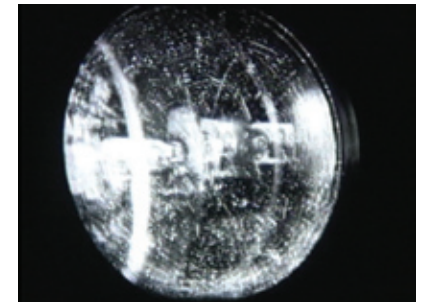
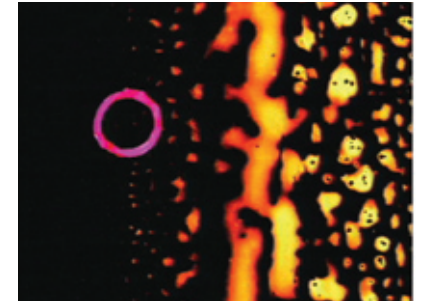
Although autonomous, amaas and the AFA are married in a profound way that transcends the evident funding relationship. Quite frankly, this marriage has been rocky, and like any hopeful spouse amaas wishes for a better future.

The second is the distribution narrative that threads through amaas' entire past. Despite being an ongoing concern, distribution of Alberta media art is the organizational issue that amaas has never been able to resolve. New media offers promising solutions, but distribution remains almost completely left to the ambition of the individual media artist.

Third, there is an ongoing challenge to find appropriate ways to utilize funding and create spending priorities. The tensions between spending and saving has partly been the result of funding insecurity but also has roots in politics between member centres and different perspectives on where spending should be allocated.

Finally, amaas is a very human organization, not in the obvious fundamental way, but rather its personality is very much a reflection

¹² It is widely felt that the entire media arts sector has the same challenge, as production and exhibition technology becomes more accessible, and traditional *raison d'être* morph.



of the people involved. When the activists were present it was radical; when the kingmakers were at the helm amaas expanded; the detailers developed a bureaucracy, the social conveners gathered.

This fluidity is reassuring. It suggests that amaas has not fossilized at all and can remain relevant for many years to come. However, as always, it requires the continued investment from the Alberta media arts community to thrive. The trick, as every maturing teen comes to realize, is learning how to step outside one's self interest and truly become community minded. In this spirit amaas can look to the future, embodying the ideal of what an alliance is, and hopes to be.

Kevin Allen is a professional arts administrator and freelance writer. A second generation Calgarian, he is currently completing his Masters degree in Public Administration at the University of Victoria. Most recently, he was the Executive Assistant to Colin Jackson, the President & CEO of the EPCOR CENTRE for the Performing Arts.

Kevin has a long history with the local media arts community and founded the successful Fairytales Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, now in its tenth year. He has been the Executive Director of the New University Television Society (NUTV) as well as the Coordinator of Operations of the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers (CSIF).

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