

NEWS

Homeless festival funding cut

Heritage Canada decision may spell the end for event

By Sam Appel
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Fourteen days before the *État d'urgence*, a four-day, five-night homelessness festival in downtown Montreal, the Department of Canadian Heritage decided to drop their share of the funding for this year's event. The decision has left ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable), the organizer of the event, with a \$43,000 deficit, and effectively rules out the possibility of a festival next year.

The *État d'urgence* – French for State of Emergency – which was inaugurated in 1998, ran from Thursday through Sunday in Place Émile-Gamelin last week. The event provided free food, clothing, and medical services for the homeless, and featured art exhibits addressing discourses on homelessness and social exclusion.

When asked why Canadian Heritage, the ministry in charge of federal culture grants, cut funding for the festival this year, ATSA co-founder and event organizer Annie Roy responded, "I don't think there is a reason for it, that's the problem."

In an email to The Daily, Canadian Heritage's press service representative Geneviève Myre noted that the ministry made no promises to ATSA this year with regard to funding, and thus had committed no error.

"Funding was not withdrawn for this festival, as no previous funding was announced for this year's event. As stated in our application guidelines, there is no guarantee of funding for applicants from one year to another," wrote Myre.

Despite the promoter's financial woes, the atmosphere at the festival on Thursday was upbeat. Evidently homeless men lit up at the sight of old friends as they mingled under the massive "protest" photographs by Argentine artist Leonel Luna.

Jean Yves, a 57 year-old Montrealer, homeless for 12 years, explained, "It's good for food, warmth, clothes, for people to get together. People come for the atmosphere." In the middle of talking he introduced an elderly man he had not seen, he said, since the man went to jail a few months before. "It's good to see him back here."

One homeless man, who introduced himself as Ralph, said he planned on staying in the park for the whole four days, sleeping in the square with other festival-goers. "I'm here for the festival just to have fun. I like to meet new personalities, that's what I like to see," he said.

Most of the visitors at the festival on Thursday did not know that the event had lost its government funding two weeks before. Jean- Matthieu, press coordinator for the ATSA, says the organization does not want to seem like it is complaining.

"We're not mad at Canadian Heritage. We try to understand. But they're putting us in a bad situation. ... We want everyone to know [about the cuts], but also to enjoy the moment," Barraud said.

However, Roy expressed her displeasure with the way the government made its funding decisions known to ATSA.

"They do not have consistency. They don't realize they are asking small cultural organizations to be responsible with their budget," she said. "[Canadian Heritage] is totally disconnected from the reality of the cultural milieu, how difficult it is to find money. They have the right to put their money elsewhere, but just do it correctly so we don't crash."

Canadian Heritage did not say whether it would renew ATSA's grant until two weeks before the festival, and before that, Roy insists, Canadian Heritage led ATSA to think it would gain substantial funding for this year's festival.

"The agent for Canadian Heritage told us to budget \$65,000. The way they were encouraging us told us that we should expect money. We kept calling throughout the year up until two weeks ago and we were absolutely not expecting a zero."

Festivalgoers, homeless and otherwise, were disquieted when told that the festival might not be back next year.

"If that's really happening, anyone who is here is going to be upset," said Ralph.

Roy holds that not only was Canadian Heritage misleading in the run-up up to the grant decision, but that the basic structure of the funding operation is detrimental to the cultural institutions it supports.

"They are not obliged to give us money but I think there is a certain ethic and procedure that needs to be followed," said Roy.

