

Audit of Programs & Offerings Cultural Diversity in the Arts

Summary and Progress Report | March 10, 2015

Introduction

The Edmonton Arts Council (EAC) is a not-for-profit organization that supports and promotes the arts community in Edmonton. Edmonton is an increasingly culturally diverse city with growing cultural communities and new immigrants from around the world. The Arts Council recognized that within the city, some artists from culturally diverse backgrounds face obstacles that arise from language barriers, biases and discrimination that prevent them from fully participating within the broader arts community. If there is to be meaningful change, it is the responsibility of the Edmonton Arts Council to adapt to the needs of artists from these communities. In May 2012, the EAC began a process to audit its practices and policies in the context of cultural diversity. Working with the Centre of Race and Culture, consultations were held with individuals representing a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including newcomers and underrepresented communities. These consultations helped to inform the audit process and established several recommendations for the EAC to engage and build relationships with cultural communities. This is an ongoing process of shared discovery that requires commitment, accountability and collaboration from the EAC and its partners.

Equity and EAC Policies

The Edmonton Arts Council's commitment to engaging with culturally diverse communities is based upon the equitable treatment of all artists. It has adopted a definition of equity that strives for equal outcomes and opportunities for all participants by removing systemic barriers and accommodating differences. True equity requires a top-to-bottom examination of the Arts Council's policies and practices, and it continues to adapt and learn. The organization's current Strategic Plan was developed concurrently with the Diversity Audit. The plan focuses broadly on equity and it includes measures on the Council's engagement with culturally diverse communities. The EAC has also committed to educating itself and it has undertaken Cultural Awareness training for all of its staff members. Through the experiences over the past two years, the EAC has learned that practice leads policy: engaging in the review process has made the EAC and its staff more aware of the opportunities and barriers facing culturally diverse communities.

Communications and Outreach

Fundamentally, culturally diverse communities want to be recognized as artists first, and assessed based on the quality of their art. Those from culturally diverse backgrounds face all of the same challenges that artists within mainstream communities face. This includes maintaining work-life balance, access to production and performance space, financial obstacles and lack of awareness around opportunities. The experience of culturally diverse artists include additional layers of complexity such as challenges of racism and discrimination, ethnocentrism of artistic methods/practice, language barriers, digital literacy barriers, poverty, culture shock, settlement related stress, and mainstream policies and practices which are not inclusive or equitable.

Community Outreach

Respondents from the 2012 Cultural Diversity Audit felt that the EAC has the potential to serve as a catalyzing force, bridging the gap between culturally diverse artists and the mainstream arts community. In order to meet these needs, they are looking for the EAC to engage in meaningful outreach and communication. Many saw the Council as a passive organization that mainly relies on its email newsletter and posters to communicate with the arts community. These individuals are eager to build an authentic relationship with the EAC, initiated by staff members going into their communities to foster an intercultural dialogue between artists and organizations. In response to these audit suggestions, the EAC created the Community Liaison position in October 2013. Kristina De Guzman has served as the Community Liaison since its inception. The goal of the Community Liaison is to develop positive relationships with diverse communities in Edmonton and to assist the EAC's continued movement towards representing and reflecting the plurality of our community. This work results in increased awareness of the EAC's programs among diverse communities and to identify, mitigate or remove the barriers that prevent their participation. Through the Community Liaison, the EAC has been able to deliver the person-to-person interaction that many culturally diverse communities have asked for. De Guzman has worked with artists and community organizations within the city to increase access and knowledge of the EAC's programs and workshops, and has facilitated the delivery of multiple workshops at public venues throughout the city in coordination with the Grants and Public Art departments. Taking cues from the community, EAC routinely extends a personal invitation to potential participants, events are more interactive, and participants are encouraged to meet and network with other artists, give feedback on the program, and share their perceptions about the Edmonton Arts Council. The interactions between the Community Liaison and culturally diverse communities are helping to grow and shape the EAC while expanding its reach and impact within the city.

Partnerships

The Edmonton Arts Council has been working to advance the visibility and participation of culturally diverse artists by developing collaborations with community partners. EAC facilitated an artist residency with the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN), as well as supporting their annual RISE awards. Local painter, photographer and ceramicist, Juan Lopezdabdoub began his residency with the EMCN in August 2014 where he spent six months building a rapport with clients at the centre in order to tell their stories through his art. The EAC also worked with the Writers' Guild of Alberta and other partners to support the Edmonton Writers-in-Exile Borderlines program. The program exists to better understand the needs of "exiled" immigrant writers living in Edmonton and to support them in their professional career. The Edmonton Arts Council has funded the Vision Quest scholarship through the Film and Video Arts Society of Alberta (FAVA) for filmmakers from culturally diverse communities. The scholarship includes a one-year membership with FAVA and access to workshops, which gives participants hands-on experience through film and video taught by experienced mentors, as well as a platform to exhibit their finished works. The EAC has also been working to develop partnerships between artists and other organizations. The work is ongoing, and the growing network of artists and partners will create new opportunities for cultural diverse communities in the arts.

Mentorship

Mentorship was identified as an area of interest, but there is no consensus on how it could be successfully implemented by the EAC. Some respondents felt that the EAC could facilitate stronger participation and outcomes in the grant process by encouraging mentorship through its grants and programs. Effective mentorship requires an experienced artist to commit the time to assisting an emerging artist in pursuing their discipline and to understand the business and administrative side of the arts. Fundamentally, mentorship is about building a relationship and it works best when it happens naturally in response to the needs and availability of artists. The EAC is hesitant to introduce a top-down approach to building relationships between individuals. Instead, the Arts Council is focused on increasing accessibility and relevance of its workshops and grants to culturally diverse communities. As their involvement increases, the growing network of artists should create new opportunities for mentorship and education.

Grants & Programs

Grants

The grants process is perceived as fair, however, linguistic, awareness and cultural barriers continue to be an obstacle for some culturally diverse artists. The Community Liaison has been able to provide more one-on-one support for artists struggling with grant applications and her presence in the community is increasing awareness of the EAC's programs. There have been more applications from culturally diverse artists across several grants, including the Community Arts Grant. When it comes to Public Art commissions, the EAC is sensitive to the representation of culturally diverse artists, particularly in art that relates to their histories and geographic location. Community engagement is a component of the public art process and it is an opportunity for communities to become involved and learn more about the process.

Prior to the Diversity Audit, the EAC administered the Cultural Diversity in the Arts Award. The purpose of the award was to recognize and celebrate the achievements of artists from culturally diverse backgrounds. Respondents to the audit felt that the award had the unintended effect of isolating cultural diversity from the mainstream granting process. In response to a recommendation in the Cultural Diversity report, the Edmonton Arts Council transformed the award into the Cultural Diversity in the Arts Grant to encourage artists from culturally diverse communities to participate in the grant process while continuing to support those who face cultural, linguistic or historical barriers to accessing support. The grant maintains the public celebration aspects of the award: for the past two years, award and then grant recipients have been announced at the EAC's annual Winter Social event. The Cultural Diversity in the Arts Grant has been an important step in raising public consciousness about the value and visibility of culturally diverse artists. This success has also translated into greater uptake from the community. In the final year of the Cultural Diversity Award, the EAC received a dozen nominations. In the most recent year for the Cultural Diversity Grant, there were more than 40 applications. The ongoing challenge is to ensure that the grant continues to support artists who face barriers and that those with the greatest need are not being squeezed out.

Juries

All grants and public art commissions that are administered by the Edmonton Arts Council are evaluated by a jury/selection committee of local artists, peers and community members. While the jury process is seen as transparent and fair, respondents to the Diversity Audit felt that it is important that juries have the sensitivity and awareness to properly assess art from culturally diverse communities. Jurors must recognize that the art produced by these artists and the way that they describe it may not conform to mainstream perceptions or values. Recognizing this, the EAC continues to ensure that all jurors are educated on the policies of the Arts Council, including its enhanced emphasis on equity.

It is also important that the cultural diversity within Edmonton's artistic community is reflected in jury composition. The danger here is treating a single individual as the voice for an entire community or the risk of minimizing culturally diverse participation with set quotas. The EAC recognizes the importance of having a plurality of voices within the pool of potential jurors. As more artists from culturally diverse backgrounds have been interacting with the EAC, the Grants department has added their names to its list of prospective jurors. The Community Liaison has also been putting forward the names of individuals who could serve on juries. As the EAC continues to increase its network within culturally diverse communities, that diversity will be reflected within the jury process.

Conclusion

The Cultural Diversity Audit was an important first step for the Edmonton Arts Council to integrate the values and participation of artists from culturally diverse communities within its policies and programs. Since the delivery of the audit, the Arts Council has followed through on several recommendations and its interactions with the arts community is expanding. The EAC is committed to the ideas of inclusion and equity and it will continue to learn and adapt to the growing needs of our communities.