

Arts Equity

Diversity in the arts has been a topic of much discussion for many years and the discussion continues to become more profound, more nuanced, and more important. As Nina Simone stated, "An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times." The population of the United States, and many countries, has never been more diverse in terms of ethnicity-- which is typically the type of diversity that is implied in these discussions, although there are many types of diversity worthy of attention and action.

In contrast, the history of western art has been dominated by rich white men for centuries, and this is seen in the canon: faces in galleries of European paintings through the Twentieth century are plump and white with rosy cheeks? classic plays, operas and ballets are based on stories of well-to-do and royalty, presumably white. It's no surprise, then, when recent studies show that today's arts audiences are not diversifying at the same rate as the general public.

This is a serious problem for arts organizations. The classic canon, portraying wealthy white people, is becoming less and less relevant to an increasing percentage of the population. When programming isn't relevant, audiences shrink. When audiences shrink, not only does revenue decrease and threaten sustainability, but many organizations' missions, which are centered on interaction with community and audience, are also threatened.

The issue is compounded by the fact that the leadership of arts organizations--typically, staff and board members-- is not representatively diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status. Community voices are, therefore, less likely to be accurately represented in strategic planning and governance decisions that determine programming. In this scenario, the programming does not adapt with changing needs of the organization's constituency and loses relevance.

The population of the Los Angeles greater metro area (LA), which is governed by a County Board of Supervisors, is one of the most diverse ecosystems in the United States, if not the world. Systemic issues related to diversity, under-representation, equality, and equity become prominent and must be addressed in LA before being recognized in some more homogenous populations. As such, in October 2015 the LA County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution stating that the LA County Arts Commission " *should be at the forefront of encouraging a constructive County-wide conversation about ways to improve diversity in cultural organizations, in the areas of their leadership, staffing, programming, and audience composition. This dialogue is an important first step in developing a thoughtful analysis and response to recent data indicating a lack of diversity at all levels in many arts organizations .*"

Los Angeles is not alone in the effort: Mayor Bill DeBlasio of New York ordered a survey of the city's cultural organizations in 2015, to assess diversity of staffs, boards, and audiences. The results were stark: 62% of the cultural workforce is white, while only 33% of residents are white. Action to address the issue is expected from the New York Cultural Affairs Department.

Though individual politicians frequently make campaign promises, and sometimes include the arts in platform statements, governing bodies in the United States rarely address issues related to arts and cultural organizations. The LA County resolution and New York survey are important statements of leadership and awareness.

In accordance, the LA County Arts Commission has launched the LA County Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative, which can be reviewed at ArtsEquityLA.com. The initiative has commenced with the formation of an advisory committee and a series of twelve Town

Hall events, at which the public is invited to discuss issues of arts equity in their communities and make their voices heard.

The first Town Hall event began with participants answering the question, "What does arts equity mean to you?" This question exemplifies the notion that equity may mean different things to different people, and that the idea of "arts equity" is a relatively new one that doesn't yet have a universally agreed upon definition. Generally, though, it is understood that arts equity involves widespread access to arts programs or experiences.

Increasing access to the arts is typically pursued by removing perceived barriers to entry. For example, to overcome high ticket prices, a performing arts organization may give free tickets to another non-profit organization serving a low-income population, or an art museum may waive admission prices during certain days of the week or times of day.

Overcoming location and transportation issues is challenging, but many institutions are finding creative ways to try. Sending productions or artworks on a worldwide tour is often a source of revenue for the owners, but also allows many people to see the works in person that may not be able to travel across the world to do so. In many cities, major museums or theaters are located centrally, which poses a challenge to residents living in outer areas, especially if they do not have easy and affordable access to transportation.

One method of improving access that should receive more consideration is to support the cultural activities that are already happening within local communities. These activities may not be the traditional fine arts as known to western art history? historical or folk arts may be more relevant, or more modern genres like breakdancing and graffiti muraling may be highly celebrated.

If a community has a depressed local economy, access to safe spaces for creative expression is likely to be an impediment. In a creative use of resources, some local governments have enabled arts entities free access to otherwise unoccupied venues, resulting in pop-up galleries and concerts.

If an area has a persistently high crime rate, residents develop a sense of distrust and do not want to engage in public activities. Though, agencies and organizations have utilized the power of the arts to unite people to build enthusiasm for campaigns or build community pride in divided populations.

In addition, under-served areas typically also have very little arts education provided in local public schools. This has been an issue for decades, so that we now have a generation of parents that have had very little exposure to the arts. These parents, presumably, are not likely to engage their children, who are also receiving very little arts instruction at school, in arts activities.

While an integral component of achieving arts equity will be to implement equitable arts education programs in all public schools, it should not be the primary solution. The cultural economy cannot wait until these children are old enough to have expendable income and the decision-making power to spend

their time and money at cultural institutions.

The cultural economy needs a strong component of adult education and engagement activities for adults. These initiatives must be as deeply supported as arts education programs for children, and as widespread. Small, ethnically-focused organizations are part of the solution, however, the DeVos Institute found that organizations of color are facing serious challenges in funding and being able to produce the breadth and range of programming they want to provide their communities.

The issue of arts equity is a complex one and important steps are being taken to start to understand and address inequities in our cultural economies. As with any complex societal challenge, there is no simple answer. Many factors contribute to the problem and as many solutions will need to be supported by organizations, citizens and governments. The problems of inequity and lack of diversity in arts organizations, however, are already detrimental to cultural institutions and must be addressed immediately and thoroughly.

Resources:

www.artsequityla.com

<http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/diversity-in-the-new-york-city-department-of-cultural-affairs-community/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/arts/new-york-arts-organizations-lack-the-diversity-of-their-city.html>

<https://diversityarts.stanford.edu/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/17/ballet-is-more-diverse-than-ever-why-is-the-audience-still-so-white/>

<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Research-Report-23.pdf>

<http://www.tcgcircle.org/diversity-inclusion-salons/#Institute>

<http://www.artslb.org/news-posts/open-conversations-on-community-arts-leadership/>

http://cheapinthecity.com/index.php?pages_id=44&t=FREE-Target-Sponsored-Museums

<http://www.lacountyartsforall.org/>

<http://devosinstitute.umd.edu/What-We-Do/Services-For-Individuals/Research%20Initiatives/Diversity%20in%20the%20Arts>



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