



public art resource center

Cultural Equity in the Public Art Field

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About the Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center

The Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center (PARC) was launched in June 2017 to serve the expanding field of public artists, administrators, advocates of public art, and field partners as they develop projects and programs in their communities. As an online portal, the Public Art Resource Center also allows individuals to find resources and tools that support their work and interests.

As part of the ongoing creation of learning resources for the public art field, Americans for the Arts is launching a year-long educational effort to help administrators and other practitioners develop equitable processes and policies for the implementation and creation of public art in their communities. This document is the first work in a series of papers, guides, and online learning opportunities to be released in 2020 and beyond that will address these issues.

As part of Americans for the Arts' commitment to championing policies and practices of cultural equity that empower a just, inclusive, and equitable nation, these resources aim to educate public art administrators and other practitioners on the issues around public art and cultural equity.

This series is just one resource available through the Americans for the Arts Public Art Resource Center. Visit AmericansForTheArts.org/PARC to explore more.

About this Essay

This paper aims to inform public art administrators and other practitioners on the many issues and challenges surrounding cultural equity and how those issues intersect with the development of public art programs and projects. Readers will understand several issues surrounding inequities in the public art field, why they happen, and how to drive interest and action to address these challenges as they relate to public art projects and programs.

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“A Monumental Journey, 2018,” by artist Kerry James Marshall, is a massive masonry structure built to commemorate the founding of the National Bar Association, the first bar association in the United States to admit African American attorneys, in Des Moines in 1925. Commissioned by Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation.

Left photo credit: Mat Greiner.
Right photo credit: M. Jessica Rowe.

Why Are We Talking About Cultural Equity and Public Art?

In the Public Art Programs Fiscal Year 2001 report, Americans for the Arts estimated 350 public art programs across the U.S.¹ In a survey completed in 2017, more than twice as many programs (728) were identified.² With rapid growth of the field and more and more organizations and individuals beginning to practice and commission public artworks, it is important to understand how to implement equitable programs and projects. Through Americans for the Arts’ ongoing cultural equity work, it is clear that in order to support public art administrators, and all those who manage public art programs and projects, guidance and insight on how to more equitably administer their work is needed. Recent conversations across the field have focused on unpacking the ways that racial, cultural, and other forms of biases, cultural appropriation, and other inequities are built into generally accepted practices as public art programs, policies, and processes have evolved over the past several decades. What now needs to occur is the naming of these problematic aspects and finding ways to solve these issues.

Public art professionals and other practitioners recognize the critical need to address inherent biases—both personal and organizational—and adopt policies that affirm their commitment to cultural equity, but are at times unsure where to begin the process. This calls for an urgent need for resources and best practices to address cultural inequities that occur in public art initiatives.

This document is a starting point to help the public art field address some of the inequities that are present in current and traditional systems. It includes an understanding of cultural equity, what inequities occur, how they occur, and recommendations on how to build a more equitable field.

What is Cultural Equity?

As defined by the Americans for the Arts Statement on Cultural Equity, “Cultural equity embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion—are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.”³ In short, cultural equity is the balance of access to, and support of, individual communities’ artistic and cultural expressions. In the realm of administering public art projects and programs, this definition looks at the ways public art is developed, how it is inclusive of community and artist engagement, where funds are directed for the implementation and care of artworks, and who is part of the decision making or policy development process. It highlights the need for review and rewriting of many of the ways public art is funded, developed, sited, and conserved. This includes reconsidering practices around diversity, community engagement, artist training and selection, distribution of funds, and contracting, among others.

What Does Cultural Inequity Look Like?

Inequities in the development and implementation of public art programs and projects exist as systemic barriers for both artists and audiences to participate in the public art process and have equitable access to public art. How a project is scoped, such as decisions around location, budget, permanent or temporary placement, how the artwork will be sited, or the community and artists engagement processes can impact who is able to participate as users or makers of a public artwork. People living in under-resourced areas may not have access to public artwork in their community. This limits who receives benefits associated with public art, including economic growth and sustainability, attachment and cultural identity, and social cohesion and cultural understanding, to name a few.⁴ In addition, artists in such areas may have limited access to public art opportunities and not have as developed a portfolio or experience level to break into the field as opposed to their more privileged counterparts. These inequities are built into systems, even if those systems were not intentionally designed to be inequitable.

Even looking at how policies and programs are administered, the field appears inequitable, as it remains disproportionately white, heterosexual, and female in comparison to national demographics, as outlined in the 2018 Local Arts Agency Salary Report.⁵ Indicated in the report, 80% of public art administrators identified as White or Caucasian, which is above the national demographics of 72.4%. Blacks/African Americans make up 12.6% of the population, while only 5% of public art practitioners identify as Black or African American. According to the 2017 Baseline Demographic Survey of the Local Arts Field, the general population of the United States is currently 36% people of color, but the arts segments lag the general population, in some cases significantly.⁶ Native communities which consist of Native Hawaiians and Americans are almost entirely unrepresented in the arts segments. According to U.S. Census projections, by 2044 the United States will be a multiethnic majority country.⁷ Though this document and subsequent trainings focus on the

policies and practices of program and project administration, it is important to acknowledge *who* is responsible for making changes to inequitable systems that disenfranchise those who are not typically managing and developing public art.

Common Inequities

Some of the more common public art inequities include funding policies that lead to public art deserts, gentrification, barriers around artists participation, community engagement processes that disempower or disenfranchise people, cultural appropriation, contracting and budgetary processes, among many others. This section dives into several types of the more common inequities currently discussed in the field and how they intersect with public art.

Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, and aesthetics of one people or society by members of another, typically more dominant people or society. It is the taking of something from a less-dominant culture in a way its members find offensive, with the feeling that the cultural heritage of the less-dominant people has been misunderstood and misused by people in a position of power or privilege.

For example, in 2015, the City of Calgary commissioned Del Geist to create a public artwork for a segment of the Trans-Canada Highway. The artwork, *Bowfort Towers*, drew criticism upon installation for its resemblance to Indigenous burial towers and for its lack of Indigenous consultation in the public art process. Blackfoot artist Adrian Stimson, whose proposal for the open competition was rejected, stated that the Blackfoot-burial symbolism is inescapable. “As a Blackfoot man, I will have difficulty going by that piece, and even as a contemporary artist, I can accept it, but I will go by thinking funeral platforms no matter what I do,” he said.⁸ The design of an artwork, whether intended or not, referenced a sacred structure of the Indigenous people who are a part of the less dominate culture. The connection that Stimson made was avoidable, however because of the lack of understanding of the community where the artwork is situated, Del Geist inexplicably appropriated Blackfoot burial towers.

It should be noted, however, that if a less dominant culture adopts something from a dominant culture as part of the process of cultural assimilation, it is not considered cultural appropriation. This distinction, which can be difficult for the more dominant culture to understand, centers on the societal hierarchy experienced by the less-dominant culture, with the pressure to assimilate widely recognized by all.

The harm caused by cultural appropriation is detrimental to the well-being of the people whose culture is being appropriated. For more reasons and general examples against cultural appropriation, read the *Everyday Feminism* article by Maisha Z. Johnson, “What’s Wrong with Cultural Appropriation? These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm.”⁹

One-Size Fits All Community Engagement Processes

A purpose of engaging community members in the process of developing a public art project should, in part, be to ensure the artist and the final artwork are reflective of the values, beliefs, and culture of the place it is to be sited. Some accepted methods for community engagement processes in public art programs can be interpreted as a requirement for



making an artwork rather than part of the art-making or conceptualization of the artwork process. These types of processes can disempower already disenfranchised communities and lead to controversy or possible vandalism or destruction of an artwork. Some factors of a community engagement process that may appear to have a lack of equity and access by the people who will be most affected by a new artwork in their neighborhood. Examples of those factors include:

- The agency approves the designation of the funds, often through an opaque process, then selects a site and an artist according to criteria which may or may not include community input.
- The artist participates in one or two structured meetings with the neighborhood, as opposed to a proactive engagement process that is unique to the community members.
- The artist creates a design in their studio with little continued engagement or connection with the neighborhood members.
- The artwork is then brought to the neighborhood, which the community members approve (perhaps because they are afraid if they don't the project won't happen), and they'd rather have some art than none.

These types of processes may leave the community feeling disconnected from the process and may never be entirely happy with the result. Essentially, the power relationship is designed by the agency and the relationship is largely transactional. Because the community is not actively defining any aspect of the project except in response to the agency's overtures, the project is inherently inequitable.

Funding Policies & Public Art Deserts

Borrowing from the term "food deserts," or areas where access to healthy food is limited by an absence of affordable grocery stores and supermarkets, public art deserts exist in cities and towns across the U.S. The absence of public art in a community denies that community the positive impact of a public art project on community identity, neighborhood cohesion, and local pride. Some of this comes about due to funding policies, such as percent for

Statue of civil rights activist and community leader Maggie L. Walker by Toby Mendez installed in Richmond, Virginia helps to tell another side of the city's history in contrast to the monuments of Confederate soldiers. Photo credits: Americans for the Arts.



“Ciguapa Antellana, me llamo
sueño de la madrugada.
(who more sci-fi than us),”
by Firelei Báez for the 163
St-Amsterdam Ave subway
station in Upper Manhattan,
represents the artist’s
Caribbean cultural heritage
and that of the neighborhood.
Commissioned by MTA Arts &
Design. Top left photo credit:
Marc Hermann. Top right photo
credit: Osheen Harruthoonyan.

art ordinances. According to the 2017 Survey of Public Art Programs, 46% of public art programs are at least partially funded by these ordinances.¹⁰ Since these ordinances are typically only triggered when a capital improvement project or city building project takes place, decisions about where public art is sited may only occur when development or redevelopment occurs. As a result, some communities disproportionately miss out on obtaining public artworks that are available to other locations. The inequitable access to public artworks based on funding models is an ongoing challenge that may need a rethinking of traditional public art funding mechanisms or a broader legal understanding of these policies and ordinances.

Gentrification and “Artwashing”

Gentrification is a process of rapid neighborhood change; whereby a low-income neighborhood’s quality of place and residents’ quality of life is raised to, or above, middle-class standards of living. Due to structural inequities, gentrification can catalyze a process wherein people who live in a neighborhood can be culturally and often physically displaced by people who are typically whiter, wealthier, and more educated. The presence of people with more cultural and economic power than current residents inadvertently puts pressure on those who were already there to either move or sell out for quick cash, displacing them either voluntarily or involuntarily to another neighborhood where they will have to rebuild their community connections and their sense of home. Gentrification often pushes people who are already disadvantaged and disenfranchised to other under-resourced areas, continuing patterns of segregation and concentrated poverty.

The notion of “artwashing” has become a common tactic to increase interest in an area and make it more appealing to bring in people who are financially willing to spend more to live in an area that has lots of cultural offerings. Artwashing is a tactic of gentrification. It includes when murals and other public art are encouraged as economic development tools, and attractive terms are offered to galleries and arts-based businesses to incentivize relocation. The community and culture that was originally in a place gets pushed out and overlaid with



dominate cultural norms in an aim to build a place that is attractive to people who can afford to participate in the new real estate or commerce offerings.

The growing presence of artists, unfortunately, becomes an indicator for future gentrification. Artists are often, paradoxically, low-income, but highly educated and may have specific space needs and a desire for creative freedom. They tend to look for places that are inexpensive and tolerant of the noise, late or early work hours, and uncommon materials used; which can vary greatly from what is permitted in other neighborhoods. However, artists also create a certain level of cultural vibrancy that attracts the attention of interests who see this energy as a potential source of economic growth through real estate development. In time, artists may find themselves unable to afford the rising costs of remaining in place in a gentrifying neighborhood and must move on.

Barriers to Artists' Participation

Emerging artists, artists of color, and even those who have experience in the field confront challenges such as biases when applying for public art commissions. There are several barriers to artists seeking opportunity and advancement in the public art industry. Some of these include biases in artists eligibility, such as educational backgrounds, experience, location, the contracting process and language, and budgetary timelines. For example, due to conscious or unconscious bias on part of the public art administrator, selection panels and other decision makers may impact an artist's ability to be equitably competitive for a public art commission. The public art administrator of a call for artists for a million-dollar public art commission may presume that an artist competing for such a commission needs to have significant experience delivering permanent public artworks and that prior experience will predict success for a commission. These assumptions exclude many artists at the beginning of their career or artists whose resumes have not previously included six or seven figure projects. Often, artists of color fit into these categories and are left out of consideration for many public art commissions based on a real lack of opportunity due to

bias, or the perception of inexperience (due to bias). This leads to a lack of representation of people of color in the public art field and an absence of their artwork in public space.

Contracts are another possible barrier and can also be daunting for even the most seasoned public artist. With 60% of public art programs reported in 2017 as part of a public entity such as a city arts commission or county arts council, and with the complexities of building an object that will be in public spaces, this isn't too big of a surprise that the contracts that artists need to sign can be a barrier.¹¹ For artists new to the field, the technical terms and complex language of legal documents can be impenetrable. The very language of contracts can be perceived as a barrier and artists may simply choose not to pursue opportunities when the first steps require major acculturation.

Bias, Prejudice, and Stereotypes

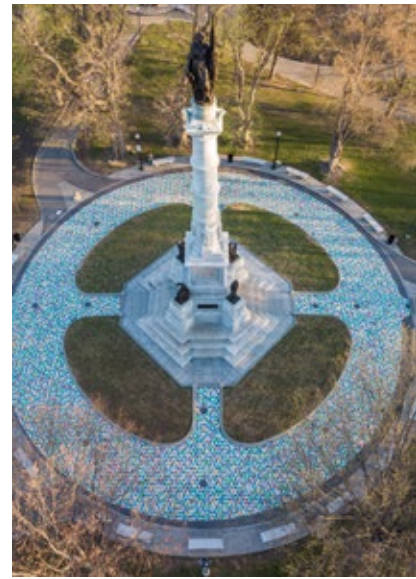
Biases are unconscious behaviors or understandings that affect how we engage with groups, individuals, or situations with which we are unfamiliar or are different from us. Stereotypes are an overgeneralization of a group of people that are often based on physical attributes such as race, sex, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. Being prejudiced or explicitly perpetuating various stereotypes are typically outward facing behaviors and can show up in our manners, thoughts, systems, and attitudes that disparage or discriminate towards an individual or a specific group based on assumptions. Though biases, stereotypes, and prejudices create inequitable and exclusive processes, biases are typically harder to flush out because of their inherent and more subtle nature. For example, if an application submission process is only acceptable through an online portal, this can build a bias against those without access to the internet. This type of bias or assumption is exclusionary and supports a prejudice that only people with access to specific technologies can be a public artist.

Though biases originate in people, they can be unintentionally or intentionally designed into organizational structures and processes. Organizational biases can influence everything from who is contracted for a commission to what kind of art is accessioned or purchased. The costs of doing business as an artist in public art can be exclusionary. An example of this can be seen in the cost of insurance of the process in which funds are paid out for a commissioned artwork. For example, many public art contracts require artists to carry commercial general liability insurance. This coverage protects the artist or the commissioning entity against damage or personal injury claims but can be cost prohibitive for many artists or difficult to acquire, therefore excluding those who may be interested in participating.

Bias for Eurocentric Aesthetics

Aesthetics is often associated with the idea of identifying and codifying a universally accepted definition of beauty. The trouble with this approach lies in the fact that typically different cultures have different or even conflicting ideas of what is beautiful. As beauty is culturally coded, clashes between ideas of aesthetics do happen and when one cultural idea of beauty rubs up against another, especially in the public realm, conflict can ensue.

For centuries in the U.S., a white, Eurocentric beauty was, and in many ways still is, considered the normative comparison for what is aesthetically good or pleasing. Typically derived from the tastes of, and informed by the philosophies of, ancient Greece and their derivations, this aesthetic has prevailed as the standard in the arts, and been coded into the public art field. Aesthetics that deviate from these standards are derided as being in poor taste, appreciated in a condescending way as “exotic,” or applauded for their violation of



norms with the assumed intent to antagonize or to create something admirable for its sheer novelty. For example, without understanding the importance of the colors red and gold in Chinese popular art, the dominant U.S. aesthetics may immediately judge them as garish or gaudy and therefore not beautiful. Similarly, not appreciating the performative aspects of some African visual arts would explain why certain features seem to us to be distorted, exaggerated, or missing and therefore ugly. With such a lack of awareness, any artwork coming from a marginalized, colonized, or disadvantaged culture has been subjected to harsh criticism for its perceived ignorance or misapplication of the Eurocentric standard and its acceptable variations. In the public art field, this can look like a Euro-Modernist abstract sculpture being placed in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood. Though the artwork itself may be aesthetically interesting by Eurocentric standards, its lack of Latin American artistic attributes may cause the residents to feel ostracized in public spaces they once felt welcomed.

The above are some of the more common cultural inequities facing the public art field. Collectively acknowledging what they are and how they play out in policies and practices is a first step in moving towards a more equitable field. By naming the issues and highlighting what they are—as ugly and uncomfortable as it may be—public art administrators and other practitioners can begin to unearth what inequities may specifically impact their communities and how changes in their programs and projects can address these issues. Part of that process is understanding how inequities were built into public art processes in the first place.

“Pathways to Freedom” by Julia Vogl was inspired by the universal themes of the Passover Exodus story and commissioned by the Jewish Arts Collaborative. The project engaged a broad multi-cultural audience from across the area in a community-wide dialogue around freedom and immigration. Photo credit: Nir Landau.

How Did We Get Here?

There is much to unpack on how these issues developed. Many of the inequities suffered today can be traced back to the first Europeans colonizing on what is now the North American continent. However, the heart of the issue is the force of one culture actively negating, dominating, or forcing assimilations of other cultures. The prolonged cultural dominance by European and now white culture on other communities—such as the cultures of Native peoples, Latinx, Blacks, and African Americans, has become institutionalized—creating the policies and procedures that support and build the arts and culture that surround everyone. One way this has played out is with the building of Confederate monuments. From *Americans for the Arts Statement on the Intersection of the Arts, History, and Community Dialogue*, “Most of these monuments were commissioned long after the end of the Civil War as part of an ongoing so-called “Lost Cause” movement to rewrite history, and nearly 200 Confederate monuments in the United States were commissioned on or after 1960, arguably in reaction to the Black civil rights movements of the early- and mid-20th century. In fact, as many as 35 of these monuments have been commissioned since 2010.”¹² The fact that publicly sited artworks were created specifically to ensure dominance and division highlights the continual challenges facing people and artists of color.

These are just a few of the national issues. Taking into consideration local and regional histories as well as societal and cultural changes may account for issues unique to public art programs across the country. Contemporary public art initiatives are rooted in these histories. How these inequities play out can appear almost innocent and as an act of giving back to another culturally specific community. For example, this can appear as an all-white selection committee selecting an artwork for a community that is predominately Latinx. In this instance, the issue is the dominance of representatives from white culture selecting an object for a people and a culture that they are not a part of and may not fully understand. Who should or should not be involved in the selection of an artist or an artwork for a community is only one of many issues that are built out of the history of cultural inequity in the U.S. Public art administrators and other practitioners will have to acknowledge these issues and learn how they impact all members of their community in order to create more culturally equitable processes and systems.

There is much more to dive into in order to better understand how history and social norms have impacted the ways public art programs operate. As the field becomes more culturally equitable, the histories, perceptions, and stories we are told about our past will need to be unpacked and understood. To do this will allow for greater and more equitable participation from those who may historically and currently feel undervalued and excluded from participating in the development of public art projects. This may include a neighborhood resident who wants to take part in the decision-making that leads to an artwork placed in their civic spaces, or an artist who wants to create their work in public places in order to expand their portfolios with new economic opportunities such as applying for a public art commission.



Where Are We Now?

Today, we are facing the realities and backlash of issues with systemic inequities and cultural dominance. We do, however, have the opportunity to create more equitable policies and processes to address these issues. With the development of systemic and institutionalized cultural inequities in occurrence with past events and decisions by people in power, we can change what policies say, how they are enacted, and who can equitably benefit from them. This will take time, a lot of work, and patience to overcome.

Though the process of reviewing and updating procedures will take time, there are ways to be more culturally equitable while cleaning up an inequitable system. For example, in Austin, Texas, artists were invited to submit applications to create an artwork for Republic Square Park, a civic open space that was part of the City of Austin's original 1839 urban design and has deep historical and cultural connection to the local Mexican people. From the late 1800s up until the 1950s, people nicknamed it "Mexican Park" in acknowledgement of the Mexican and Tejano families who lived around the Square, as well as factories such as Walker's Austex Chile Company, that helped shape the Tex-Mex cuisine that still thrives in Austin.

After Anglo artists Joseph and Holly Kincannon were awarded the project, a Latinx juror who was on the staff of a local museum of Mexican art objected to the selected team. This juror felt that an artist with Mexican heritage should have the commission to more authentically express the historic and cultural importance of the site. The Kincannon's artwork, titled *Blackbird*, is a large limestone sculpture stained a deep black to resemble Oaxacan pottery.

"Blackbird" by Principal Designer Holly Young-Kincannon, Assoc. AIA and Master Carver: Joseph Drummond Kincannon. Commissioned by City of Austin Art in Public Places. Photo credit: Philip Rogers Photography.



The “RedCan” Graffiti Jam, led by artists EAST Fostr and contributing artist Wundr, was held in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, on the Cheyenne River Sioux reservation. Professional Native and non-Native graffiti artists worked with local youth to merge Lakota and graffiti cultures and celebrate individuality, positive self-expression, creativity, and healing of the Cheyenne River community. Commissioned by Cheyenne River Youth Project with funding from the Bush Foundation. Photo credit: Mo Hollis, Wingspan Media.

Members of the public commented on the sculpture on social media, sharing their concerns of the cultural appropriation of Oaxacan pottery imagery by the Anglo artists. The response from the public led to several additional community engagement meetings facilitated by the Austin Art in Public Places staff and centered on the concept behind the work and the selection process. While there are still some in Austin who believe that the artists were not entitled to reference Oaxacan pottery because of their whiteness, by the time the sculpture was installed, the juror who initially rejected the artist team celebrated their artwork. The artwork was lauded on a national level through the Americans for the Arts 2019 Public Art Network Year in Review program. Because the public art administrators listened to the concerns of the juror and the public, they were able to address some of the issues around cultural appropriation and come to a healthy acceptance of the final artwork.

However, cultural insensitivity can be perpetuated by administrators if they are not working with their communities and helping artists understand the local histories. For example, in 2017, the Walker Art Museum’s Minneapolis Sculpture Garden undertook a multimillion-dollar renovation which included a sculpture conceived as a commentary on capital punishment by artist Sam Durant. Titled *Scaffold*, the work included elements referring to seven different executions by hanging, one of which related to the killings of local Native peoples, the Dakota Indians. By the order of President Abraham Lincoln on December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota Indians were hanged in the largest mass execution in U.S history. The hangings took place in Mankato, Minnesota, as a response to the Dakota War (or Great Sioux Uprising) of 1862. *Scaffold’s* large, boxlike frame recalled the gallows erected in Mankato a century and a half ago. Members of the Dakota community opposed the sculpture and rejected an apology offered by the Walker’s executive director. Through this painful



experience, the artist and the director both realized that the community should have been consulted about a piece with such a clear connection to a difficult part of Dakota history. Ultimately, the artwork was dismantled and buried in an unknown location.¹³

We are at a crucial point of addressing inequities. With the rise of such social, cultural, and political movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, the public art field can come together to address past inequities and build a field that is culturally equitable to all. This will take time and patience, including understanding and acknowledging past wrongs and moving forward to create more equitable processes and systems.

How Do We Get Better?

In *Americans for the Arts Statement on Cultural Equity*, one of the points to fuel progress in the field is to pursue needed systemic change related to equity by striving to encourage substantive learning to build cultural consciousness and to proliferate pro-equity policies and practices by all of our constituencies and audiences.¹⁴ Education about cultural equity and the highlighting of equitable policies and practices is one of the ways the public art field can move forward. Part of this work is building cultural consciousness, or the process of developing awareness of culture in the self, which can result in expanding understandings of culture and developing deeper cultural knowledge about other individuals, histories, and contexts.

Two ways to begin to move forward is by increasing cultural competency and understanding personal and organizational biases. Cultural competency describes a state of self-awareness and an acknowledgement of cultural identity through a demonstrated capacity for applied

For the “RedCan” Graffiti Jam, artists painted in 10 outdoor locations across the community. It offered the Cheyenne River’s community an unparalleled opportunity to experience the contemporary graffiti art movement, learn about different techniques and styles, and paint alongside master artists from across the country. Photo credit: Mo Hollis, Wingspan Media.

intercultural learning. It is similar to diplomacy as it guides and informs our engagement with community, especially through our public art projects. Cultural competency is often misinterpreted as a directive to gain expertise in cultures and subcultures that may be shared between parties. More specifically, cultural competency in the public art realm prompts artists and administrators to evaluate the appropriateness of our efforts to provide representation or advocacy for others rather than giving that power, access, and autonomy directly to artists and communities.

Part of cultural competency and being more culturally conscience is engaging with different cultures. Before you begin the work of improving your awareness, determine why and to what end you are seeking new relationships. Once you have determined the purpose and intention, consider the following suggestions to increase cultural competency and build trust through new relationships:

- **Learn About Local History.** Understand the local history. Take a class at a local community college, go to a local history museum, or find events on local history and culture. Doing these actions can give you insight into the root cause of systemic inequities that exist in your community and what role your institution or municipality might have played in the establishment of these systems and structures.
- **Invest in Cultural Competency Training.** Educate yourself and colleagues to more readily understand cultural appropriation when they see it and be empowered to address it. This can help staff speak openly about the pain of racism, cultural appropriation, and other inequities with artists and the public and be prepared to address these concerns when they arise.
- **Connect with Cultures Different Than Yours.** Attend events, find reading materials, and expand your network to engage with those from different cultures. Reach out to your network or connect with an organization that works directly with a community with which you are trying to build a relationship. Research hashtags, event pages, and other e-places that may be of interest or connected to the community. Ask your connections with the local communities to make introductions into spaces or groups that you are not a part of and take the time to build a trusting relationship before making an ask or offering support.

The key to authentic relationships is being genuine in your intention and ensuring mutual benefit to the conversation or connection you are looking to make.

These are just a few of the ways to begin to increase cultural competency. Investing the time, thought, and money into cultural competencies will build a better connection between public art programs, the people who administer them, their communities, and artists. Visit AmericansForTheArts.org/CulturalEquity to find more ideas and resources.

Understanding biases requires self-awareness work that may be uncomfortable, but necessary to help build an equitable public art commission process. Knowing how to identify biases in ourselves and organizations will help address inequities and build more inclusive processes. A tool to help in identifying individual biases is the [Implicit Association Test](#) created by Project Implicit, which has become a hallmark for identifying personal biases.¹⁵ The free tests were designed by psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington to measure unconscious bias. It is recommended to take one or

more of the tests in order to understand biases better and begin to understand what biases you may have and what you can do to overcome them. Acknowledging the test results will be uncomfortable, but you will begin to learn where you may need to work harder to ensure you are implementing an inclusive and equitable system.

To overcome your biases and remove bias from organizational systems takes time, but there are steps you can take. For personal biases, these two actions highlighted in “What Is Unconscious Bias and Why is it Important to Understand” from Virgin.com can help you address your own biases.¹⁶

- **Focus on people.** Rather than thinking about the characteristics of someone’s ethnicity, gender, or class background, focus on them as an individual. Give them credit for their merits based on the evidence you see in front of you, rather than what you’re expecting based on your own biases.
- **Increase exposure to biases.** Once you’ve identified what your biases are, try exposing yourself to them more regularly. If you seek to prove your biases wrong, it can have a positive impact on your behavior. For example, if you believe women are better at showing empathy than men, seek out stories of men who have shown great empathy and have been highly successful as a result. Such efforts will start to challenge your bias.

Overcoming personal biases has its challenges, but it is doable. Take it one step at a time and remember it is a process, so be patient with yourself.

To overcome organizational biases, there are a few steps you can take to start this work. First, become familiar with organization-wide policies or procedures on procurement or vendor selection. Understanding these structures will help you unearth where potential biases or preconceptions may exist around the selection of artists and purchasing of art. Reach out to the various departments whose work impacts hiring and contracting professionals. Work with your public art commissioning agency’s governing systems, including risk management, finance, and contracting to remove barriers to allow artists with low incomes to compete on a level playing field with artists who have more resources. Look for people and departments who are involved in the management and distribution of public art-related funds. By getting to know them and their work, you will gain insight into what challenges and opportunities there are and create allies to reduce barriers as you build or update your public art processes to be more equitable.

When understanding organizational biases, ask questions to learn how and why structures and requirements were put in place. For example, as mentioned in the Bias, Prejudice, and Stereotypes section, if your contracting process requires artists to purchase general liability insurance, but the budget doesn’t cover this cost, then artists with low incomes may be discouraged to accept a commission from your program. What looks “fair” and “equal” may unintentionally disadvantage or advantage one group over another. Work with your colleagues to discuss ways to create more accessible systems and loosen requirements. Set equity goals and state your expectations clearly, then follow up regularly to affect the change needed. This may take time, so be patient as progress may be slow.

Additional recommendations on how to tackle organizational biases are listed in the LinkedIn blog article, “Tackling Bias Within the Organizational Culture.”¹⁷

As you move through program administration and project development work, check in with yourself to identify if biases are coming up for either you or the organizational structures you are working within. Being mindful of when biases are impacting your process will allow you to take steps to address inequities and create a more equitable public art commission process.

Learning how and what biases influence the public art processes and practices, and expanding cultural competencies, are important steps in building a foundation for equity and inclusion. This work, though messy and uncomfortable at times, will help build healthy practices that can extend a bridge to communities and individuals who might have felt left out of previous public art projects or programming.

We Will Become More Equitable Together

In starting to name the cultural inequities plaguing the public art field, it is easier to understand how to move forward and where change needs to happen. This document provides an overview of current cultural inequities, understanding how we got here, and how we can create a more equitable public art field. Though this document may not address all current issues, and may even have some biases of its own, it aims to provide a baseline to help public art administrators and other practitioners with the understanding of what cultural inequities exist in the public art field and ways to address them. The work that public art administrators implement in their communities is impactful and can create a sense of belonging and place for those who live, work, and visit the area. Through continuing education and ongoing dialogue on how to address inequities we will move towards a more equitable field that is accessible, inclusive, and transparent.

Endnotes

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