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Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

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Abstract

The King County Arts Commission was established in 1965 to support arts and culture in King County. Over nearly four decades, the county expanded its mission and activities to include public art, landmarks and heritage, consolidated in an Office of Cultural Resources. In 2003, the office was chartered as an autonomous public development authority. Renamed 4Culture, the agency remains accountable and dedicated to serving the citizens of King County, a population rapidly growing in size and diversity. Founded on a strong set of organizational values centered on the right to express and experience one's own culture, the organization has had to remain focused on its mission, while flexible and responsive in the design and execution of its programs. Gallery 4Culture, its exhibition program, is representative of the agency's values of equity and inclusivity.

4Culture and Gallery 4Culture: A Case Study

A public arts agency is distinguished by its success at consistently delivering on its mission while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing social, economic, and political environments. 4Culture, King County, Washington's arts and cultural agency has maintained this kind of focus and flexibility for over forty years. Encompassing much of the Seattle metropolitan area, King County's population has grown in size and demographic diversity during that time. 4Culture has kept pace, keeping resources for arts and culture accessible to their complex and changing constituency.

The King County Arts Commission was established in 1965 to support arts and culture in King County. In 1973, the County passed one of the nation's first percent-for-art ordinances allocating one percent of capital project budgets for the inclusion of public art in County facilities. In the 1990s, the Arts Commission, the Public Art Commission, and the Landmarks and Heritage Commission were consolidated into the Office of Cultural Resources (OCR) (Crowley, 2002).

By 2000, King County was rapidly becoming more urban. An increasing proportion of County land and tax revenue came under the jurisdiction of newly incorporated suburban cities. In 2002, the OCR's general expense budget was cut by half. King County Executive Ron Sims and then-OCR Director Jim Kelly began to investigate converting the OCR to a public development authority (PDA), in order to preserve the agency while expanding its funding opportunities (Crowley, 2002). Kelly defined the PDA as "an arm of government, created and funded by government, but not part of government. It's an entity that exists between the government and the nonprofit sectors" (Bargreen, 2002, para. 1). While remaining accountable to County government, this structure would position the agency to expand the use of public funds

for arts and culture while gaining access to other sources of revenue such as grants, that are not typically available to a government agency.

The County Council ratified an ordinance, effective January 1, 2003, that established the Cultural Development Authority of King County. Kelly became Executive Director of the new entity and the OCR staff continued largely intact. In 2004, the PDA was renamed 4Culture to represent the four programming areas: Arts, Heritage, Preservation and Public Art; and reaffirm the agency's commitment to serving the needs of individuals, organizations, and growing local arts agencies (Crowley, 2002). The transition to a PDA raised public awareness of public arts and prompted the question, what is "the net outcome for the region's arts and heritage community?" (Bargreen, 2002, para. 3).

Charlie Rathbun, 4Culture's Arts Program Director has been with the agency since 1993. He was the Associate Director of the Arts Commission at the time of the transition. He predicted that the change to a PDA would speed up the grant process by circumventing the county bureaucracy and permit faster direct service for artists and arts organizations receiving support. It "would shorten the grantmaking and contracting process by months, so we have better response time" (Bargreen, 2002, para. 3).

Organizational Culture

The staff of 4Culture designs and executes an array of innovative programs that fund, commission, and promote art and cultural experiences. These programs are unified by the goal of serving the diverse constituencies in King County equitably. A strong set of organizational values focuses on the importance of art and artists; heritage and preservation; connection to community; and the right to express and experience culture (4Culture/ Mission, n.d.). These values inform all aspects of the agency's work. The organization also reflects the political

realities that shape work in the public arena. Rathbun explains that the agency evolved with those values as

...part of the DNA that is key to vitality and the community's perception and support for us. We are a product of politics and the political era, yet it is easy to think we are all about art. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind we are part of a political process. It is dangerous to think that we are insulated from the process. (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

This sentiment is evident throughout the organization. It shapes the commitment of staff members to be responsive to the public. Heather Dwyer, 4Culture's Manager of Artists Programs since 2003, describes the organization as a "cultural service provider." A key component of this is supporting both art makers and audiences with opportunities for cultural experiences. Dwyer notes the shared interests of the public "as an audience or as a consumer" and artists as "creator[s] of cultural experience." She explains, "I do believe that artists are at the core of supporting the arts, specifically, and so I think you can't support the arts without supporting artists" (personal communication, February 25, 2020).

The economy and the marketplace continuously fluctuate. Throughout its history, 4Culture has consistently provided funding for the arts in King County through an evolving slate of grant programs. 4Culture staff members seek to practice adaptability within each of the program areas. In Rathbun's opinion, a key to success is the ability to constantly evolve within a changing environment. "The key principle, inclusivity, involves making the tent bigger by bringing in more people. The audiences, staff, and relationships are seen as being ahead of the curve. [It] keeps one questioning: what is the essence of who we are?" (personal communication, February 26, 2020).

Collaboration is also a key value of the organization. Kelly, who retired as Executive Director in 2018, emphasized the pursuit and value of collaboration within “the four programs, the breadth of programming, the vision [of] working together, the importance of art and heritage working together” (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Dwyer adds that

It’s staff driven here. We will all tell you that this is a staff driven organization. If we think something is not fair and not right, we talk about it and we make change, or we test things out and make change. That’s the best part of being here, that we have the ability to do that and experiment. (personal communication, February 25, 2020)

Principles of inclusion and providing equitable pathways are an important objective across all program areas. Funding programs have been designed to address social inequity in the process and applicant pool. There is an emphasis on providing support and encouragement to artists and organizations applying for funding. Helping emerging artists and small arts organizations to make good applications is part of the staff’s commitment to equity. Kelly recalls that at times 4Culture accepted handwritten paper application forms, aware that some artists did not have online access. “The goal has been to meet people where they are at. If information was missing from a form, the individual would be contacted, not disqualified” (personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Commitment to social equity is part of the selection process for grants. For selection panels, the staff seeks panelists who are diverse in age, gender, and race. Attention to equity is carried “through our outreach, through our process, through the dialogue that we have in that room. We’re helping through the extra services and support that we provide to selected artists” (J. Howland, personal communication, February 26, 2020). A robust representation of diversity, seeking those with an inclusive perspective has always been priority at 4Culture with a

“willingness to serve with points of view that stretch across a deep engagement to lead a program, by searching for and appointing members who were experts in their field” (J. Kelly, personal communication, March 4, 2020).

Gallery 4 Culture

The King County Arts Commission opened its own in-house art gallery in 1979. Rotating exhibitions were hung on the walls of the agency’s offices. In 1987, the gallery was given its own dedicated space in the Smith Tower where the Arts Commission’s offices were located (4Culture, 2020). In 2004, 4Culture moved to 101 Prefontaine Place South, on a prominent corner in Pioneer Square, a neighborhood known for its lively art and music scene. Gallery 4Culture occupies a storefront in a block with several other art galleries, both private for-profit and non-profit artists’ collectives.

Kelly saw the gallery as a mechanism for promoting the work of early-career artists (personal communication, March 4, 2020). Jordan Howland has been on the staff of 4Culture’s Public Art Program since 2008 and, as Curator and Collections manager since 2015, manages Gallery 4Culture. She describes how the gallery acts as a gateway for artists who are new to government grant programs. “Often the exhibition opportunity is an artist’s first opportunity for a solo show, or their first opportunity for a small group show” (personal communication, February 26, 2020). Showing at the gallery may be the point of entry for visual artists, providing an initial understanding of 4Culture as an organization and its connections to resources and communities within King County (J. Howland, personal communication, February 26, 2020). Rathbun connects the purpose of the gallery to the agency’s larger mission:

As a publicly funded, process-oriented organization, the allocation of public funds to developing artists creates a gateway for artists towards further representation and

provides access to art experiences. Within a mission-driven organization, that distinguishes the work from the commercial sector. (personal communication, February 26, 2020)

The cultural climate, the market, and the gallery world are shifting towards “fewer brick and mortar storefronts and much more reliance on an art fair model...[and] online representation” (J. Howland, personal communication, February 26, 2020). This makes Gallery 4Culture’s focus on under-represented artists, both culturally and age diverse, even more important.

One of the markers or eligibility requirements for those artists is that they are not represented by a commercial entity at the time they apply to show their work in our space. I think one of the other markers is really artists who are interested in... expanding their practice beyond ways in which they have historically worked, and [are] also interested in creating work that’s not necessarily saleable, that’s not really part of the - what we would call the art industrial complex or the commercial side of the art world. (J. Howland, personal communication,” February 26, 2020)

Howland explained that, unlike commercial or museum curators, the gallery staff do not act as a decision-makers. As in all 4Culture programs, citizen panels select the artists. The decision-making process is based on the artists’ proposals, their ability to execute a show, and articulation of ideas in dialogue with the group of panelists. Once selected, the artists work with gallery staff who support them in approaching the opportunity and guide them through the installation process. Staff recognize that mentoring the selected artists can be a chance at leveling the playing field (J. Howland, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

4Culture continues to impact King County artists, audiences, and communities. Their enduring focus remains enhancing lives by supporting opportunities for the public to experience cultural and artistic works; and supporting the artists who create these experiences. Their adaptability and willingness to change has created their emblematic form of support that matches individual needs, accessibility, and innovation.

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Thea Mercer, MFA 2020, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership program applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. As part of this research during Winter Quarter, 2020, interviews were conducted with 4Culture staff members Charlie Rathbun, Arts Program Director; Heather Dwyer, Artists Program Manager; Jordan Howland, Curator and Collections Manager; and former Executive Director Jim Kelly. Laura Becker, Senior Public Art Project Manager suggested using Gallery 4Culture as a lens to view the principles of the organization. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

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