Principles for Equity in the Arts

A Preliminary Framework for Programming & Projects
developed by the
2017 Equity Fellows
of the
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

modeled on the Engineering for Equity
framework of the San Francisco Human
Rights Commission
The intent of this book is to distill the conversations of the 2017 YBCA Equity Fellows into useful tools for those in the arts to use before their next big thing, to eliminate the inequitable effects of their work and build relationships with community that yield mutual benefit.

Approach your project through the following steps and answer the questions raised. To commit to this process is to prioritize and take root in a necessary foundational shift. A commitment to develop equity principles in how you work ensures that the philanthropic values of artists and the art world provide a centering force for opportunity communities that moves them upward through channels of power, to build bridges between them and create ladders of real opportunity and lasting change.

Seeking to realize this vision is the first step towards a mutually beneficial correction that is vital and necessary for art and culture.
When we seek “equity” in the arts, what do we mean?

This is a deceptively simple question. To define equity is to imagine a future where revised systems refocus strategy, reapportion existing resources, and create new resources for communities that have historically been given only a seat at the table (and usually less). A working definition of equity is the equality of outcomes rather than access or opportunity. It is an acknowledgment that “equality” as it has been practiced in our culture has proven historically insufficient to address the statistical disparities, wealth gaps, and discrimination we see. Equity is both agent and structure; it is an inherently inclusive and loving process that is also messy, iterative, and uncomfortable. The pursuit of equity rattles the complacent and provokes the powerful.
Equity is not about being a savior for the underserved. Rather, it is about unpacking and course correcting for the conditions that lead to inequities to begin with, all while examining and naming one's own positionality and privilege. It is the result of de-centering whiteness and re-centering communities of color and the low income communities where artists often work and whose residents museums seek to empower.

Equity in the arts, then, is building this into our culture’s stories as well as structures. The process is the destination. It is a pathbreaking journey of questioning, self-reflection, and above all, deference. The following are guideposts for you to facilitate this work within an arts institution or reexamine your own role as an artist in gentrification, displacement, and other inequities.
Look to Black, Brown, and Indigenous women; the poor; the disabled; queer; elders; fringe and radical creatives; and thought leaders whose work in the margins is overlooked when leadership casting.
Any discussion of equity begins with the acknowledgment that, in many ways, each of us sustains the status quo because we value its inequities. For dominant cultures, the end justifies the means. We value stereotypes, barriers, and hierarchies for providing structure and meaning for our lives and how we understand ourselves as human beings. Developing conversations about equity touch upon these implicit biases in often unexpected ways. Equity makes tradition shift in its seat, avert its glance, perspire. It disrupts as profoundly as it empowers.

For these reasons, real conversations on equity cannot take place overnight. Plan for the time, resources, and commitment to build the trust necessary to confront these tensions fully. Practice self-reflection as a group before starting work in community. Expect community mistrust, and move at the speed of trust. The next steps are built upon a foundation of mutual respect, empathy, and the capacity for vulnerability among collaborators, coworkers, community contacts, and outsiders approaching the group for the first time.
Relationship building is paramount to working on these systemic issues. Yet transparent and direct communication can hinder or expedite the work of relationship building. Conversations around equity between coworkers or within institutions contain layers of institutional power dynamics that operate in addition to individual dynamics. Give space to different communication styles and experiences. Big groups or online spaces only work for some. Broaden your base of whom you seek decisions from, and make sure to reach everyone involved. A project’s success in advancing equity depends on the depth of relationships among collaborators.

Equity cannot be prescriptive. It must be understood within the context of who is in the room and why they are there. It is important to invoke ideas such as speaking order to reverse structures of systemic power held in our varied histories and experiences. For example, allowing black queer women to speak first or have the first seat at the table acknowledges deep layers of historical and systemic oppression these bodies carry.
Questions to Answer

How does our process actively cultivate and promote access, vulnerability, clarity, and self-love?
Do our intentions come from community?
How can we maximize inclusion while facilitating belonging and discovery?
How do we foster these authentic connections among partners?
Who is in the room, and who has decision-making authority?
Who will be directly affected by our idea? Do they have decision-making authority?
How do the people affected by the work have agency to act on their own behalf?
Who else needs to be included in the conversation?
Embrace Tension

The other, all who are creating and thinking outside of the hegemonic box, are invited into cultural institutions to transform them.
Art is central to challenging and shaping the way we see, hear, and engage the world around us. Art has the unique potential to create a connection— or discomfort. To reach collaborators, you must begin from a place of trust. Trust engenders healthy dialogue; collaborators need safety to really show up. Conversations about equity are inherently complex and difficult. To speak of equitable approaches is to identify white supremacy and white preference as our dominant culture and to acknowledge their failures.

Moreover, good intentions and positive attributes often contribute to inequities, which can lead to defensiveness and confusion. For example, individualism, perfectionism, or intrigue is often valued in the arts, yet these traits can damage a project because they promote “white supremacy culture” and move collaborators away from each other. It is easy to allow one's personal feelings to sabotage this effort. Make ready for this and decide whether to include participants' and administrators' personal stories and contexts while cultivating this process.
Questions to Answer

What do we propose to do?
What have we been doing to address disparities? Has it been working?
Who is this art for?
What structures reinforce inequity from the conception to completion of our idea?
Who benefits most from what we propose to do?
What stories do we value above others?
Which stories can we center or rewrite with an equity lens?
What barriers exist that we can shed light on in ways that audiences can engage with meaningfully in a one-day event?
How do we empower audiences to leave with tools to confront institutional inequity?
What are our blind spots?
Who can we bring in to see them?
Do we continue to ground our relationships in trust, compassion, and empathy?
We know cultural realms are hella privileged, but we also know they are both agent and structure.
Assessing conditions requires an examination into what policies, practices, and procedures created and contribute to the current health, safety, economic welfare, and environment of a community, including collecting data on structures, relationships, resources, and other determinants of equity.

Institutions should also gather and analyze information about current programs and policies aimed at reducing disparity, how they are working, and opportunities for change. Create space to embrace and understand the multiple intentions of all the collaborators. Honor outside knowledge. Deliberately add value to and center the voices of those who have not historically been fully valued in the discussion, such as people of color, women, youth, LGBTQI, low-income, and neurodiverse folk, while acknowledging intersectionality and privilege.

Finally, to assess conditions, consider what community-level conditions you seek to impact and the role you or your institution must play to achieve those conditions.
Questions to Answer

Why are we the ones to make this work?  
Who have we been working with? Why?  
What does the community want us to do?  
Is there a gap between this and what we propose to do?  
If so, is this program or piece the best way to maximize community-level impact?  
How have the artists and stakeholders explored questions of credibility, authenticity, and integrity?  
How does the work reflect an enduring commitment to the community, practice, situation, locale, or issue/topic?  
Have the artists and stakeholders considered what they might be taking away and what they can leave behind that is meaningful in a cultural context?
Equity as a process sprouts seeds of internal agency. In the cultural realm, our thriving and activating seeds are deliberately sustainable.
The arts must build relationships with community that yield mutual benefit. Designating community as integral partners allows artists and arts institutions to overcome the perception of bias, gain community buy-in, and ensure an effective reception.

Building bridges also entails recognition of the ways in which previous policies, practices, and investments have been insufficient in achieving equity. Arts institutions as well as the communities they serve will benefit from clear articulation of inequitable outcomes created by past programs or pieces and collectively creating mechanisms to prevent repeating those impacts. Tailored approaches are needed to bring justice and foster a creative community which truly reflects the greater neighborhood and surrounding areas. Include representatives from the community from the beginning for project design, development, and implementation. Without community leadership in project development, it is not a community project. Have a written document that spells out transparently what the role of the community is and what the expected outcome will be.
Questions to Answer

What is the type and purpose of our convening?
Do our plans contribute meaningfully to community, or is community a prop?
How can our system be more participatory?
Where can community expertise on the benefits and burdens of previous arts programming be implemented?
How can we budget for time and revisions based on community input?
How can we create and publicize pathways for artists from non-traditional backgrounds to participate and show work?
How can we prioritize paying/compensating artists for their work and participation?
Are there provisions to ensure ongoing data collection, reporting, stakeholder participation, and accountability?
Create Ladders

Cultural realms are liberating pathways.
Arts institutions can create ladders by providing opportunities to move marginalized people and equitable ideas upward.

In daily tasks, a range of experts are activated and engaged. Community members have specialized knowledge on the way in which the art world has benefited and burdened their neighborhood. To advance equity, community input must continue to rise to the top managerial levels, and institutions must respond and adjust to it. Similarly, it is incumbent upon equitable arts institutions to create mechanisms that ensure the expertise of internal talent, including front facing or non-managerial staff, has influence on the allocation of resources.

Engaging those in the community you are serving should be a baseline. Provide omni-directional mentorship opportunities to future leaders from impacted communities and prepare them to be in troubling spaces. Invite impacted community members into leadership roles. Always spend time on the legacy of the work you are sharing and facilitating.
Make sharing of funds transparent. Prioritize payment of artists and contributors for their work and participation, and make sure your budget includes this as part of the process. Budget so that there is no arbitrary cutoff and contributors do not have to choose between paying rent and doing the work for free. The bigger the organization, the more important this is, because failing to make sufficient budget makes the institution look like they are not treating artists or contributors well, and because peer pressure can exploit poor artists and contributors into being poorer in pursuit of equity.

In addition, identify and credit work already happening in the sector or with community. Show up for your partners’ events and actions; do not simply ask them to come to yours. Equity demonstrates concern for people whose actions are not appropriately valued in society.

Finally, ensure that policies, practices, or investments that have not ended or otherwise reduced disparities are not replicated.
Questions to Answer

What does a successful collaboration look like?
Does our institutional culture create uplift?
How does the collaboration actively cultivate and promote access?
What institutional or structural barriers are keeping people from working together?
How can we cultivate collaboration despite those barriers?
Who are the staff with relationships, institutional support, or the audacity to create change?
How does our decision-making structure meaningfully include or exclude non-management staff?
How do you demonstrate that you value comments and feedback?
How will the level, diversity, and quality of ongoing community engagement be assessed?
Consider Impact

Cultural realms are people-ful. The moment influences the movement.
Considering impact involves visualizing what success looks like and planning for how impacts will inform future work. Write work plans that have clear institutional accountability mechanisms built in. Build future muscle.

From the outset, collaborators should determine whether their impact will be transactional or transformational. Transactional approaches are issue based, help individuals negotiate existing structures, and have short term gains for communities while leaving existing structures in place. Transformational approaches cut across multiple institutions, focus on policy and organizational culture, disrupt institutional culture, and shift values and political will to create equity. The scale of a project or program’s impact on inequity depends on minimizing transactional programs and investing resources for transformational ones.

Give precedence to the community’s priorities or goals. Let them shape the outcome, and be open to a different end product.
Questions to Answer

Will our results be transactional or transformational?
Who will this impact? How?
How can adverse impacts be prevented or minimized?
What positive impacts on equity and inclusion could result from this proposal?
Has power been translated to affected community members?
Are there further ways to maximize equitable opportunities and impacts?
What provisions could be changed or added to ensure positive impacts on equity and inclusion?
Does this art contribute to gentrification?
How do we address appropriation of community values, space, or capital?
How do we sustain community bonds?
Examples

Equitable exhibitions and arts programming in the Bay Area.

An exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts that successfully held down a space for equity of voice and participation. Brett Cook was especially graceful in extending equity upon the space.

teachingartistsguild.org/socially-engaged-education-making-learning-visible

**“Carved in Silence,” Dir. Felicia Lowe, 1988**

The immigration station art display on Angel Island, especially the documentary, “Carved in Silence,” interrogates the problematic detention of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island, at its source.

dowedownproductions.com/carved-in-silence
**Destiny Arts, “Illuminate”**

A multimedia theater production in Spring 2017 from a community youth arts/dance company in Oakland. Destiny Arts is made up of youth in middle and high school, many of whom are people of color from high risk neighborhoods. “Illuminate” addressed many of the social justice issues from the November 2016 election, including xenophobia, violence against women, and racism. Youth led and designed the writing and choreography with the director's help.

[destinyarts.org](http://destinyarts.org)

**Dis/Play**

An exhibition at SOMArts in 2015 that brought people with and without disabilities together to create art installations and performances, as well as present work by local artists with and without disabilities. SOMArts’ programming incorporated ASL and large-print interpretive materials for all performances and paid performers (above the going rate of zero).

[somarts.org/display](http://somarts.org/display)
Emerging Arts Professionals, “Emergence”

EAP’s mission is to create an arts industry that is equitable for all people, is a valued & sustainable career sector, and honors the individual arts worker as a creative and whole person. “Emergence” is EAP’s annual convening that encourages omni-directional connections through generations, career levels, business models, and disciplines.

emergingsf.org/emergence

EastSide Arts Alliance

Founded in 1999 by East Oakland artists of color, EastSide Arts Alliance is best known for its annual Malcolm X JazzArts Festival, a free celebration of Third World art and performance, political education, and community entrepreneurship. EastSide also produces Live Arts in Resistance, a multidisciplinary performance series that centers the work of experimental artists of color. EastSide's cultural center also hosts events for community organizations.

eastsideartsalliance.org
Liberating Ourselves Locally

A people-of-color-led, social-justice-oriented maker space in Oakland, led by a gender-diverse, majority queer and trans crew of hackers, healers, artists, and activists of color.

oaklandmakerspace.wordpress.com

Friday Nights @ OMCA

The Oakland Museum of California hosts a weekly event that is accessible, inclusive, and caters to a wide variety of audiences and interests, attracting a diverse crowd. Family-friendly performances and food trucks are free to see, and the Museum itself offers reduced-price admission.

museumca.org/friday-nights-omca
Oakland First Fridays

Free, accessible, and inclusive, Oakland First Fridays bring galleries, artist collectives, street artists, chefs, performers, musicians, dancers, DJs, comedians, poets, and local businesses together with diverse Bay Area communities on the first Friday of every month.

oaklandfirstfridays.org

Peacock Rebellion, “Brouhaha”

Peacock Rebellion is a group of Bay Area queer and trans artists of color committed to amplifying the voices and experiences of queer and trans folks of color. “Brouhaha” is a recurring, all trans women of color storytelling and comedy show.

peacockrebellion.org

The People’s Kitchen Collective

An Oakland-based, food-centered political education project and cooperative business.

peopleskitchencollective.com
In 2016, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) convened three groups of fellows to act on question prompts related to social justice and the arts. Thirty Equity Fellows were convened to answer the question, “What does equity look like?” Equity cohort members are listed on the outside cover.

From July 2016 to August 2017, the group—artists, educators, scientists, community advocates, musicians, designers, architects, cultural critics, writers, lawyers, filmmakers, and other Bay Area thought leaders—approached questions of equity from the initial process and facilitation of meetings to completion of the “Public Square” event that concluded the Fellowship. One result of the Equity Cohort’s continuous, deep commitment to answer the question, “What does equity look like?” is this book.