RESTORING
THE FUTURE PRESENTS

TOWARD
CURATORIAL
JUSTICE

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OVER VIEW

Curation exists all around us. It has long since been simply a practice unique to art galleries and museums. Today, we are exposed to media and imagery on a constant basis, all of which is a function of curation — the act of choosing which stories are seen, and which are not This dynamic is present in the algorithms that influence our social media content, the journalism entities that dictate which stories are written into history, and the film and television programming we consume across an increasingly innumerable list of platforms.

"Curation is romanticized as an act of care, but it is really an act of arbitration, of judgment."

— **Jemma Desai,** *This Work Isn't For Us*

Images then possess immense power and ability to shape human perceptions, create preconceptions, and to a large degree define the level of empathy and thus the behavior toward those who are othered.

And the curation of these manifestations of culture, across all media, has a deep impact on communities, and carries with it immense responsibility.

For example, when curated thoughtfully and intentionally, cinematic artforms can shed new light on largely unexamined lived experiences, center the perspectives of voices previously at society's margins and even facilitate healing on a community-wide level. When curation is irresponsible, it creates real harm on an emotional, physical, social, economic and even a policy level. And yet, the ethics of curation are in many ways a final unmapped wilderness in the media arts industry. Over the years, artists and institutions alike have examined the ethics of conduct between virtually every sector of the film industry from filmmaker, on-camera participants, crew, philanthropy, distributors, studio executives, assistants, nonprofit institutions, their employees, and more. Yet absent from this conversation of relational industry ethics is that of the interconnection and frankly, the power imbalance, between curator and community.

The roots of filmmaking are steeped in well-documented power imbalances, most notably between filmmaker and on-camera participant. Films like *Nanook of the North* and *Birth of a Nation* have been over the years equally lauded for their pioneering technical achievements as they have been justifiably condemned for overt and intentional racist and colonialist depictions of Black and Indigenous people. In a recent article for Documentary Magazine, authors Sonya Childress and Natalie Bullock-Brown cite these same two films for their ethical lapses and their impact in the field. "Both received critical acclaim and box-office success, and cemented their place in history as pioneering cinema. Both presented people of color as primitive or savage, and each film spawned cinematic motifs and an intentional centering of whiteness to all 'others' that is replicated to this day in Hollywood and beyond."

And when considering the real political intent and impact of these films' depictions of their participants, it is undeniable that they have generated tangible, immense and lasting harm upon the real world communities they depict. This, for example, is particularly well documented in the groundbreaking Pillars Fund study executed by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, ***Missing and Maligned,*** which explores the connection between misrepresentation of Muslim communities in global film and television and the "epidemic proportions" of anti-Muslim hate in the real world. These connections between filmmaking and community impact have been demonstrated through studies again and again. Art informs culture, culture defines society and public policy, and policy projects undeniable impact on individuals and communities. Images then possess immense power and ability to shape human perceptions, create preconceptions, and to a large degree define the level of empathy and thus the behavior toward those who are othered from

whiteness and all dominant cultures. Capitalism then compounds this potential impact, as notes Themba Bhebhe, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at the European Film Market, since "gazes from outside of communities on those communities often generate symbolic and concrete capital gains from the images of communities which are then packaged and fed to global north audiences, often reinforcing their skewed belief systems about these communities."

And so, unethical filmmaking aesthetics and processes have over time been increasingly and necessarily deconstructed in contemporary practice, in attempts to dismantle practices that create a gaze that evokes harm in the real world. The current discourse around and evolution of what truly constitutes "consent" to participation and depiction of protagonists in documentary film is a prime example. For example, a protagonist may agree to participate in a film at its outset based on the relative level of trust with the filmmaker at that stage of the process, but depending on the filmmakers' conduct over the course of what can easily be a lengthy period of time, that level of trust can erode to the point where the film has come to represent that person or their community in an inaccurate or harmful manner. This depiction when programmed and distributed then holds the power to move into the world and perpetuate harm against that individual and their community on a large scale. Thus it is now perhaps the prevailing wisdom of the independent documentary field that no longer is consent purely a legal or clerical inquiry, a box to be checked at the commencement of production, but a consistent and care-centered dialogue between filmmaker and on-camera participant throughout the life of the project.

And much like the evolving definition of consent, the work of revolutionizing and decolonizing artmaking praxis on the whole is ongoing. Contemporary frameworks for a more just praxis have very recently been created by several organizations, such as the ***Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG)*** and the Reimagine Legal Framework (prototyped by ***Detroit Narrative Agency),*** that seek to cement what ethical progress has been made in filmmaking practices, and to advance it.

And yet what has rarely been addressed openly is the fact that the curator of an irresponsible or ill-intentioned film is also a participant in the harm that film does to communities. Our entire film industry has been built around principles of scarcity and selectivity over abundance and pluralism. In other words, we have decided, whether explicitly or implicitly, that gatekeepers are a necessary component of a thriving media arts system, because we have not yet created a viable system where anyone's story can be told and accessed universally around the world. Thus, the act of curation — of connecting a story to an audience, a central part of the film ecosystem — also bears responsibility for minimizing harm.

Acts of curation take many forms, even when restricting our lens to that of the film and television industry, all of which are necessary to examine in this report. Curation includes the choice any media arts institution makes to fund a film's development or production; or the choice to select it for an incubator, training program, or project market; or the choice a distributor makes to acquire and release a film, the choice an independent theater makes to book a film, and increasingly importantly today, the choice a film festival makes to program that film. But through what perspective and process are all these gatekeepers curating? As Women In Film's Senior Programs Director Maikiko James articulates: "Curation is often the default methodology when a program or physical exhibition space lacks room or resources for all applicants. For a number of reasons, programs and platforms don't use 'first come, first served' models, or everyone who applies within a given timeframe model, etc. But it's worth digging into those reasons beyond capacity and resources —because it leads to questions around the genesis of criteria, meritocratic standards, and so many more that the organizations in this report consider."

Over the last few years, our field has seen an increasing number of films programmed by major film festivals that, upon examination by the field, have been revealed to demonstrate unethical filmmaking practices, an absence of duty of care in place to safeguard a film's protagonists, and too often the perpetuation of deeply harmful stereotypes of the communities at the center of the story. These films have created deep indi-

vidual and community harm, sparked fieldwide concern, and elicited organized responses from the independent filmmakers and culture workers within institutions of all sizes. Rightly so, for in the act of curation, an institution that holds power and prestige, signals to its peers and to its audiences that this depiction of a community has value and is worthy of wide proliferation for broad impact.

Themba Bhebhe again: "Films and film festivals aren't just about artistic expression. When you curate, you are putting a narrative into culture, so the impact that narrative will have in real life is a tremendous responsibility." And indeed, the more visible the platform, the greater that responsibility becomes, and the greater the potential harm. Jessica Devaney, Founder and President of Multitude Films: "the exclusion of authorship and political context from an evaluation of artistic merit is a pattern across top-tier festivals' programs. These festivals disproportionately influence which films distributors choose, which are poised for awards, and ultimately which ones reach a wide audience. Programmers shape our culture, values and political landscape. The choices they make have an enormous impact on real human lives. It is time programmers dispense with the notion that a film can be judged without considering who is helming it creatively and the political context in which it unfolds. We urgently need to expand the standards by which we evaluate the merit of a film—standards often falsely upheld as objective."

Veteran programmer, researcher and writer of what many consider to be a seminal examination of notions of "representation" and care, *This Work Isn't For Us*, Jemma Desai offers another important perspective, that "programming as a method is working exactly as it was designed." She elaborates that "festivals are a site of gentrification. They erase the politics of the work. Smaller community specific festivals are able to codify and work from values, but concepts of safety and harm reduction are not possible at larger institutions." Indeed, in Girish Shambu's recent article, *Manifesto for a New Cinephilia*, he creates a distinction between traditional filmmaking (and by extension, film curating) priorities and contemporary progressive perspectives. "The pleasures at the heart of the old cinephilia are predominantly aesthetic. The new cinephilia has a broader definition of pleasure: it values the aesthetic experience of cinema, but it demands more. It finds pleasure, additionally, in a deep curiosity about the world and a critical engagement with it. Cinema teaches us about the human and nonhuman world in new and powerful ways. Traditional cinephilic pleasure is private, personal, inward... The new cinephilia radiates outward, powered by a spirit of inquiry and a will to social and planetary change. It is no coincidence that so many filmmakers valued by the new cinephilia—women, queer, indigenous, people of color—have an interest in activism, and view cinema itself as part of a larger cultural-activist project. It is equally no coincidence that com-

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—**Themba Bhebhe**

paratively few straight white male filmmakers share this trait." Among many things, one critical observation Shambu makes clear here is the increasingly widely held perspective that the symbiotic relationship between community and artist — and by association arts curator/funder/distributor — is undeniable, and as much as some institutions might wish to be "apolitical" and distance community impact and engagement from their purview and silo those considerations with artists, that perspective is shortsighted and irresponsible. Art — and by association curators that exhibit that art — either uphold or dismantle society's status quo, but they cannot do both.

Desai adds: "Film festivals say they center decolonization but can they do so when practices with colonial logics are in their original design? These are practices that we as audiences and as industry people often enjoy, often celebrate. To decolonize a film festival, we would have to decenter the individual Festival Director, or an individual artist, remove prizes, dismantle criminal justice language like that of the jury, and remove the element of competition altogether. We would remove roped off parties, VIPs, different levels of access and 'quality'. In the end we wouldn't have a festival." Indeed, here Desai highlights some of the subtle ways in which values of scarcity, competition, hierarchy, and even exploitation for financial gain underlie the template of what a film festival is.

However, over the last decade, we have seen leaders emerge in the field of film curation that have begun to dismantle these colonial frameworks and practices in lieu of more ethical and community-rooted ones, and are as we speak, charting the course toward a just and beautiful future for film programming. And yet — these just curatorial practices are rarely shared outside the walls of their individual organizations. There are a variety of systemic reasons for this siloing of film programming practices, most notably that film festival programmers and operations staff are unilaterally over-taxed and under-resourced to do the work of putting on a film festival to begin with, and there is little to no capacity to engage in wider discussions and knowledge sharing with the field. Additionally, these roles are precarious and financially unstable, which can mean that even these seasonal positions are not an option for less privileged individuals, thus compromising the utility of such programmatic analyses if they were to occur. However it became clear from our participants' contributions that there also exist those organizations that simply have no interest in engaging in field building practices like this, because to do so dismantles their perceived tastemaking monopoly, and reduces their power. These outdated perspectives must be challenged through sustained public conversation, knowledge sharing, and most importantly, intentional and values-aligned future architecture. The purpose of this report is to begin to do just that.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

We at **_Restoring the Future_** are a consultancy of culture workers committed to designing, prototyping and proliferating restorative practices across the media arts system. For over a year, in deep thought partnership with the **_Programmers of Colour Collective,_** we have had the privilege to be in conversation with many leaders at the forefront of cultivating more just and equitable film festival programming and operations practices, resulting in a comprehensive Curatorial Justice Project.

Over 50 leading programmers from a variety of community-rooted film festivals and other forms of organizations engaged in curatorial practices (with a heavy emphasis on BIPOC programmers, BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving organizations) shared with us their values and practices, which are gathered and synthesized here in this report, which is intended to function as an open fieldwide resource and toolkit for values-aligned organizations in the field.

To co-create this report, we engaged a host of curatorial leaders in deep conversations about their personal and organizational values and practices, which are gathered and synthesized here in concentric circles of influence.

The methodology that went into this report is an extension of the culture strategy, organizing and worldbuilding (i.e., a meticulous and systematic future visioning process) that led to the creation of the first Restoring the Future report published in 2021. These origins were rooted in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic as many institutional leaders from historically marginalized communities came together to disrupt the traditional practices of artist support nonprofits and center restorative justice values to address the centuries-old harms toward our constituents. One part field scan, one part exercise in future architecture, the report — and the ongoing work of Restoring the Future — is rooted in worldbuilding. Using our unique worldbuilding methodology and practice, our participants co-created a vision for a radically aspirational media arts system, and issued provocations on how to begin to move toward that future. Following the publication of

the report, its principal creators, Karim Ahmad, Tony Patrick and Brenda Coughlin, created the Restoring the Future consultancy, one part decentralized network of culture workers, and one part worldbuilders for hire, with a mission to gather and share the outputs of more justice-centered cultural organizations such as DAWG, DNA and the [Color Congress](#) for wider proliferation, identify the gaps in the industry where new prototypes (i.e., new interventions or infrastructure in the field) are needed, and use our worldbuilding methodology to co-create and share them openly. Thus, the focus of this report is on the practice of curation and its implications and opportunities for community responsibility, as demonstrated by our participants.

To co-create this report, we engaged a host of curatorial leaders in deep conversations about their personal and organizational values and

practices, which are gathered and synthesized here in concentric circles of influence. We begin with the festival programming teams at the core of this work, to the operational dynamics around them that impact audience constituents, to the institutional pressures on their programming and operations employees, to the systemic barriers to the advancement of curatorial justice, which we will begin to define, alongside several other key terms, in the next section. The result is a co-created framework of current practices in use by those most deeply embedded in this work and provocations for the future of the field distilled from the recommendations of the participating programming leaders manifest during our worldbuilding sessions, designed to envision their radically aspirational future of film programming and how we might begin to arrive there. Our topline findings and the resulting calls to action are delineated as follows:

CALLS TO ACTION...

1 Curatorial Values

Cultural institutions must develop and make publicly available their organizational artistic values and commitments to responsible curation, which will transcend the personal priorities of their staff and inform selection processes and accountability measures. .

2 Data Analysis

Curatorial organizations must intentionally gather and analyze the demographics of their submitting filmmakers, their programming staff, and their audience constituents in an effort to maximize stories from and curation by their priority (e.g., global majority) communities, and thus curate to accurately reflect society or a visionary society of the future..

3 Team Expansion

Programming teams must work to maximize the cultural expansiveness of their collective makeup and knowledge base, and the plurality of perspectives vetting any given film, while also acknowledging this effort is inevitably insufficient to ensure authenticity, because of the complexity of intersectionality and lived experience..

4 Harm Reduction Protocols

In the event that problematic films fall through the gaps, despite diverse programming teams and/or a commitment to curatorial justice practices, organizations need a clear protocol on how to manage such cases, prioritizing the reduction or elimination of harm caused to the communities depicted in these films, which may include removing the films from a selection, public ownership of the oversight, etc.

5 Power-sharing

Curation requires humility. Thus, in an effort to advance a community-centered approach to programming, curators shall meaningfully engage all programming team members, programming fellows, community members, external culture bearers, subject matter experts, and ethical reviewers as often as possible in order to vet films as responsibly as possible.

6 Operational Praxis

Curation of a film festival or any other exhibition venture exists within an ecosystem of operations, institutional policies and culture that can either uplift those values even further impede them. Thus, institutional senior leaders and boards of directors must better protect and support festival programmers and operations staff to drive and operate from artistic and community-centered values.
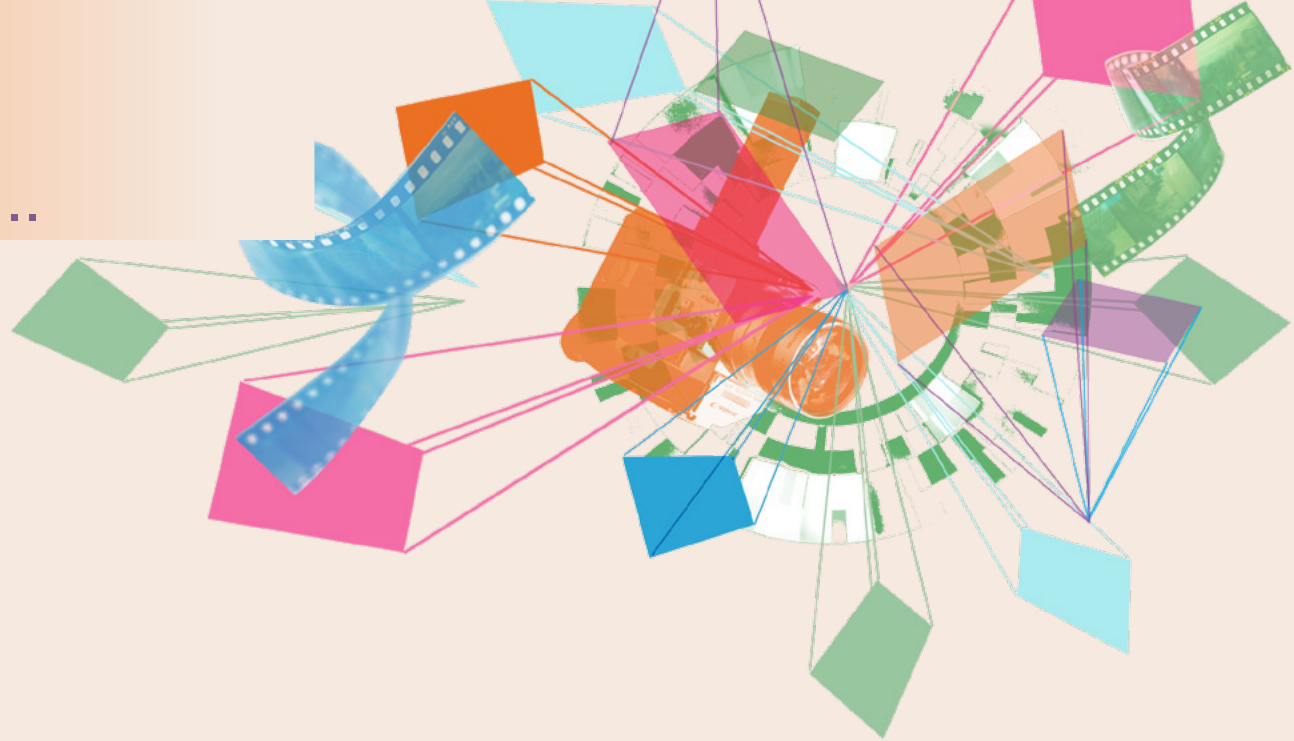
7 Structural Sustainability

Philanthropy and corporate sponsors must resource festivals to advance the festival's values and practices, and new economic models must be developed to make film festival labor more sustainable. This work is often extractive and traumatic, and needs to be resourced to center care and community engagement, if curatorial institutions are to sustainably contribute to a pluralist cultural democracy. While this has not historically been the stated goal of many curatorial organizations, this report argues that moving forward, it must become one, due to the real world impact of curation in all its forms. .

CALLS TO ACTION...

8 Restorative Justice

The media industry's inability to acknowledge inadvertently harmful curatorial choices stifles discourse, creates barriers to industry progress, and prevents community healing. Thus, programmers, their institutional leaders, and our entire media arts system must cultivate a culture of — and frameworks for — accountability, community engagement, harm reduction, and restorative justice. A framework for a restorative justice process between such media arts organizations and communities they serve is included in this document as an overview and point-of-departure for how this kind of process can work.

9 Resource Programming Disruptors

Long term fieldwide curatorial change requires sustained knowledge sharing across all arts organizations, and a well-funded industry organizing effort led by a uniquely-suited body, such as the Programmers of Colour Collective.

The following report will explore the contextual factors, experiences and analyses that have led us to this set of calls to action, which manifested from the programming leaders interviewed. In reading this report, its authors and collaborators invite you to consider these perspectives, practices, recommendations and calls to action. Together they are intended to function as a prototype toolkit and collective visioning statement for the curatorial sector of the field — a collection of justice-centered practices in place at justice-centered organizations and an overview of the individual, organizational, and cultural values that led to their creation. We as a field have the

power and potential to transform our industry in alignment with our deepest human values and eschew the extractive and exclusionary vestiges of old models. This is merely a beginning of a conversation long overdue, the outcomes of which will naturally grow and evolve as the discussion itself does.

To be clear, the purpose of this report is not to cast aspersions, to call out, or to tear down any individuals or organizations for oversights in current or past practices and values. Quite the opposite. The purpose of this report is to gather, synthesize and uplift the work of those that are

building important new ways of working and pushing the field of curation toward progress and healing. In highlighting the work of these leaders, our intention is to call the rest of the field into dialogue, to invite them to adopt and uplift similar values and practices, to build a stronger foundation for our field, and deepen our industry's commitment to those historically oppressed communities that are at the center of our stories. Stories cannot exist without the communities they arise from, and we all must carry the responsibility of the impact our stories have when they return to those same communities.

PARTICIPANTS

Anderson Le, Hawaii International Film Festival

Anya Rous, Multitude Films

Ariel Ottey, Human Rights Watch Film Festival

Aymar Jean Christian,
MADE Lab, Open Television

Barbara Twist, Film Festival Alliance

Beth Barrett, Seattle International Film Festival

Can Sungu, Sinema Transtopia

Charlie Hidalgo, Out On Screen,
Vancouver Queer Film Festival

Clint Bowie, New Orleans Film Festival

Cornetta Lane Smith,
Detroit Narrative Agency (former)

Don Young, Center for Asian American Media

Elijah McKinnon, Open Television

Eseel Borlasa, Visual Communications

Eugene Sun Park, Full Spectrum Features

Farrah Rahaman, BlackStar Film Festival

Frances Underhill,
Human Rights Watch Film Festival

Francis Cullado, Visual Communications

Jason DaSilva, AXS Lab / AXS Fund

Jemma Desai, This Work Isn't For Us

Jessica Devaney, Multitude Films

John Biaggi, Human Rights Watch Film Festival

Karen McMullen, Urbanworld Film Festival

Kiyoko McCrae, New Orleans Film Festival
(former), Chicken & Egg Pictures

Lauren Monzón, Third Horizon

Leah Sapin, Human Rights Watch Film Festival

Lela Meadow-Conner, mamafilm, rePROFilm,
Film Festival Alliance (former)

Lendl Tellington, BlackStar Film Festival

Lucy Mukerjee, Programmers of Colour
Collective, Firelight Media

Madeleine Hakaraia de Young,
Māoriland Film Festival

Maikiko James, Women In Film (WIF)

Mallory Martin,
Cleveland International Film festival

Maori Karmael Holmes, BlackStar Projects

Martine Joelle McDonald, Outfest (former)

Naomi Middleton, AXS Fund

Nehad Khader, BlackStar Film Festival

Pauline Clague, Winda Film Festival

Ryan Pearson, Detroit Narrative Agency

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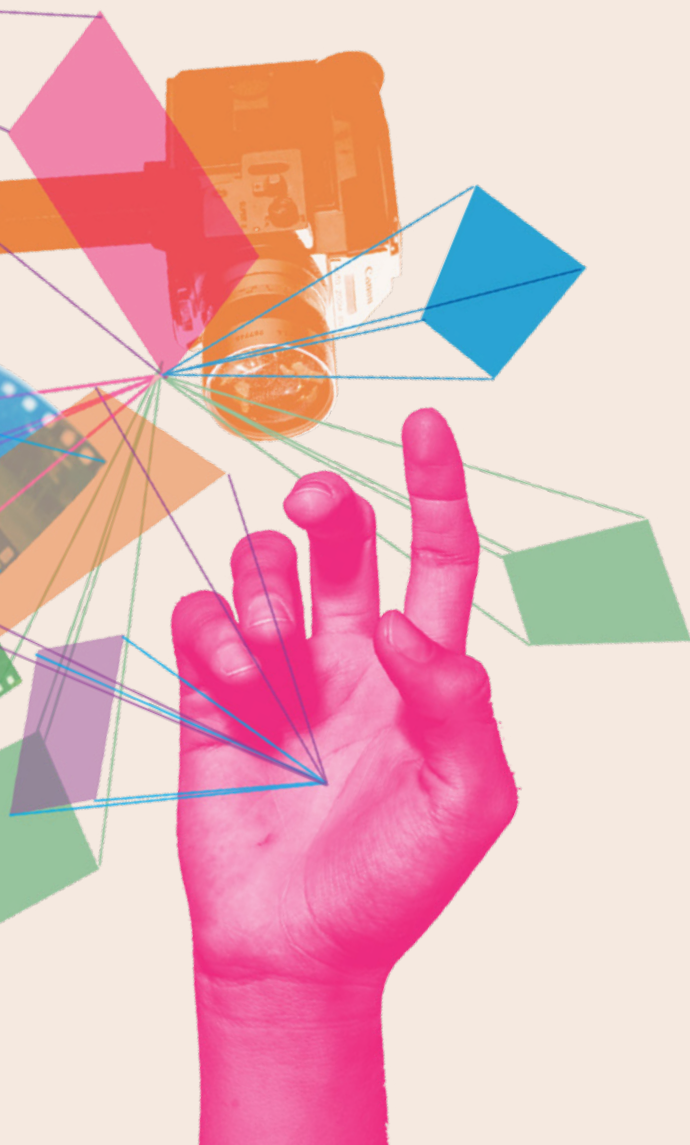
Tambay Obenson, Akoroko

Themba Bhebhe, Programmers of Colour
Collective, European Film Market, Third Horizon

Thuy Tran, Center for Asian American Media

Zuri Obi, New Orleans Film Festival

Additional curators who chose to remain
anonymous

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Before we begin to unpack the key findings of our research into curatorial justice values and practices, it is useful to establish a common lexicon by defining some key terms; perhaps most importantly, that of curatorial justice itself, which is still a somewhat emergent concept, even in more radical film spaces.

Indeed, even the concept of a curator as a job or practice is one that does not exist in many countries or languages. Thus it is understandable that the definitions of curation naturally vary across our participants, but the most basic essence of the practice is perhaps best defined simply, as the act of selecting and connecting art (in this case, film) and its makers to an audience in one form or another.

The added question of how justice may manifest through the practice of curation is equally debatable, as noted earlier in the comments from Maikiko James. Several panelists in a recent curatorial justice conversation at the 2023 BlackStar Film Festival also questioned whether justice is even possible in the act of curation, especially for those curators based outside of the US, where the colonial dynamics of the curatorial process are especially apparent, even down to the language used to engage in that process. Thus, the question of whether curatorial justice is even attainable remains an open one, which is why this report is intentionally titled "Toward Curatorial Justice," because while we may or may not be able to fully achieve it, we might be better served by asking how we as a field might continually move closer to it.

However to do so, we must also intentionally ask what shape or form of justice we seek to move closer to. Most technical definitions of justice are unhelpful to our purposes here. These definitions are largely framed from within the punitive or carceral justice systems that are the oppressive norm in contemporary society, and as we will discuss later, the form of justice we advocate for here in the curatorial field is not punitive, but restorative. It eschews punishment as a practice and instead focuses on repairing the harm caused by one's actions and engaging individuals and community members in the process.

More to our purposes here then is the question of how reformist or radical is the kind of justice that this report advocates for. The nuances of the answers to this question unsurprisingly vary across the range of participants we interviewed. But many highlighted the core tension between the realistic short term and aspirational long term manifestations of the kind of justice they feel is necessary. For example, many cited shared values (both personal and institutional) that aspire to a more radical definition of justice that is unmoored from the capitalist white supremacist foundations of our current judicial, political and economic systems. However, often in the same breath, many also of course noted that these systems are our undeniable present reality, and their organizations' and communities' daily survival requires participation in those economic systems, at the very least. So perhaps it is most accurate to frame the kind of justice this report advocates for as a "short-term reform and long-term reinvention" strategy, where we might look for ways in the immediate future to triage the harm occurring in the systems we are at present forced to operate in, while we are also reinventing a more radically aspirational framework for curatorial justice in the further future. Thus, for our purposes here, we will intentionally define curatorial justice itself somewhat broadly, in order to encompass both of these approaches, as the pursuit or advancement of more ethical, caring, and regenerative relationships between curators and the communities depicted in the artwork they program.

Additionally, this report will make numerous references to "community," in various contexts. These include reference to underrepresented or historically marginalized communities, which include but are not limited to people of color, women, non-binary and transgender individuals, people with disabilities, Muslims and LGBTQ+ communities. We will also reference community in the context of an organization's community of constituents, which will understandably vary among organizations, however we largely chose our participating organizations for their clear and expressed commitments to supporting a combination of historically marginalized groups to begin with. We acknowledge, however, that this definition of constituent community breaks down somewhat when considering the relationship between a curatorial organization (e.g., a film festival or artist support organization or distributor) and the larger commercial industry. As participant Jemma Desai noted, a central question we as a field need to ask ourselves is "are we willing to turn away from the industry or are we the bridges that connect artists to it? The curatorial landscape of labs, distribution, festivals etc. are part of an ecology of commerce. The larger community or audience is another form of relation. Part of this differentiation sits in a wider ecology of artmaking and the kinds of art making that are elite, and the kinds that are 'mass.' The curator is a mediator for the elite arts."

Lastly, it is important to state that because of the demographic makeup and lived experiences of the authors of this report, and those of the participants who shared their perspectives with us here, there are of course some inevitable key assumptions or biases that will manifest here as well. For example, while some non-US-based programmers did contribute their perspectives, the vast majority of our participants work predominantly within the US and its occupied territories.

Of the 50+ curators participating in this project, while the vast majority of them were or are programmers for film festivals, we consulted with a wide variety of organizations engaged in different curatorial models. For example, artist support organizations engaged in the selection of artists and projects in various stages of development or production, values-driven for-profit companies with a curatorial process that feeds a double bottom line, and new and disruptive distribution companies that are also taking a values-driven approach to curation. Despite a variety of business models and approaches to cultural production, what unites all of these organizations is that each takes a deeply thoughtful and examined approach to their relationship to their core constituent communities in artistic curation, and seek to reinvent the practice of curation in very intentional ways.

Thus the selection of these participants for these very approaches and practices, and the ways it informs our findings is intentional. We did not seek to conduct a comprehensive survey of curators at every institution. Instead we chose to learn from those whose work shows leadership and commitment to the pursuit of curatorial justice.

INSTITUTIONAL HARM AND REPAIR

Before embarking upon a journey into this co-created future of curatorial justice, it is important to first articulate some of the values and practices that our participants have identified as problematic, in their experiences, i.e., the harmful dynamics that their current practices seek to solve.

For example, several of our participants related to us experiences of harm especially while programming at legacy festivals and predominantly white cultural institutions. Understandably, many of them chose to remain anonymous for their own professional safety, however, it is important that this document broadly characterize some of these experiences that our participants related, both for context, and also to understand who these unjust curatorial practices motivated them to create some of the advances that we will articulate later. Thus,

we will also contrast these instances with new institutional models from our participant organizations that embrace restorative justice in an attempt to unlearn the toxic status quo that exists within so many nonprofit and for-profit organizations alike.

THE TOXIC STATUS QUO

Much of what our conversations with participants yielded about the experience working within large legacy festivals and other cultural institutions is that toxic practices manifest as either 1) an intentional lack of a clear or codified process, or 2) a process that exists to a point, after which personal decisions from the most senior programmer on staff take over. For example, one programmer categorized their experience at one such organization as having a complete lack of tangible process, and that "one just had to be the loudest voice in the room, and you have to get comfortable with being able to yell the loudest. But honestly, that is just a horrible thing to ask a programmer to do."

If the priority is to program a film that will sell handsomely to distributors, then ultimately, the priority community the festival serves is the sales market, which holds no values beyond maximizing viewership numbers. Thus, what is sensational — and often unethical — is frequently what is deemed most valuable to a distributor, and thus the festival. And in this transaction, it is the community depicted on screen (not the distributor, the festival, nor the filmmaker) that experiences harm.
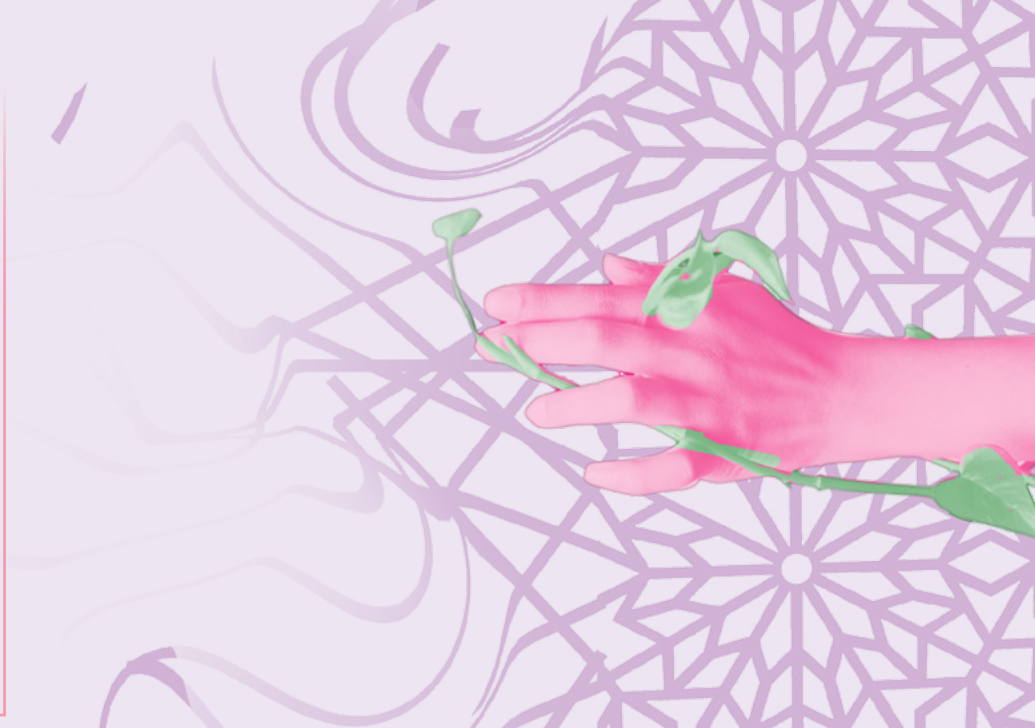
Another programmer with experience at a large curatorial institution explained that within their individual programmatic categories and teams, they consistently sought to interrogate the relationship between filmmakers and the communities depicted in their films, but that their potential to shift institutional practices was extremely limited, because their programming teams were siloed by design with little collaboration, and consistently programmed based on their individual personal priorities.

Another programmer we spoke with was brought into a large American film festival because of problematic films that were programmed previously about a particular marginalized community. So moving forward, that programmer was sent all the subsequent submissions by and about

that community, so they could weigh in on them, and then was subsequently not listened to. Films they objected to were allowed in and films they advocated for often did not get in. "The programming team spent a lot of time over the course of the year talking about ethics and representation and then it all gets submitted up to the Festival Director to make final decisions, and that person was more interested in what would get press and what would sell. There was intensive thoughtfulness in our process, and then all that was thrown out at the end in lieu of what would sell tickets and sell to distributors."

This experience highlights a common characteristic we gleaned from our discussions with programmers at large festivals. Some referenced a curatorial priority to "never miss a hit," i.e., don't

miss programming a film that will make a splash and sell big to a distributor. While this may seem an innocuous perspective for a film festival at first, upon deeper consideration, we felt this demonstrates problematic values. For if the priority is to program a film that will sell handsomely to distributors, then ultimately, the priority community the festival serves is the sales market, which holds no values beyond maximizing viewership numbers. Thus, what is sensational — and often unethical — is frequently what is deemed most valuable to a distributor, and thus the festival. And in this transaction, it is the community depicted on screen (not the distributor, the festival, nor the filmmaker) that experiences harm.

EXAMPLES OF CURATORIAL HARM AND REPARATIONS

And yet, to a very large extent, curatorial oversights and the potential for community harm is inescapable. There is no way to reasonably guarantee or ensure that a film has not misrepresented its protagonists in some manner, or conducted ethical violations during production, or committed any other lapses in the care and safety of anyone involved from crew to talent to the surrounding community depicted onscreen. Without being there, embedded within a production, it is impossible to truly accurately gauge the probability of these problems having occurred. In regards to misrepresentation specifically, as we noted earlier, art is not immune to the inevitable shifts of culture and public opinion over time. Quite the contrary, a perception of misrepresentation is perhaps eventually more likely to occur over time than not. Many of those we interviewed cited that legacy cultural institutions too often refuse to acknowledge this inevitable fact, demonstrating a lack of humility and responsibility to the communities they have depicted through curation. However the organizations studied here within this report make active efforts to acknowledge that arc of public opinion and cultural perspective, and have embedded a perspective of humility into their curatorial praxis, as evidenced by the various ways in which they have cultivated a culture of accountability and reparations with the communities they serve.

This praxis begins with a willingness to publicly acknowledge the slipperiness of ethical rigor to begin with, and to recognize that this is a growth area for all festivals, and anyone programming documentaries especially. For many, this begins with an inward- and outward-facing culture of humility, and deep listening and engagement with constituent communities on an ongoing basis. This often takes the form of having numerous conversations with the community year round about their concerns and organizations making themselves accountable for any manner of institutional decisions or practices, and not being afraid to be in dialogue with community members with concerns. Several festival representatives noted having candid and humble conversations with community members and filmmakers about films they programmed and films they didn't, and being willing and able to admit to having an oversight, and taking reparative action.

Some festivals are also having explicit conversations about ethics with filmmakers telling stories about communities that are not their own — especially when that filmmaker is white. Over the last few years, films such as *Sabaya, Tantura, Writing With Fire,* and *Jihad Rehab* have been widely discussed for ethical lapses. Perhaps most recently, the Schwarze Filmschaffende Afro-German film collective raised concerns about the anti-Black films *Measures of Men, Seneca and Helt Super!* in **a public statement,** which details the manner in which the aforementioned films "replicate, fuel, extol, promote and spread

anti-Black racist images, tropes, stereotypes and discriminatory narrative forms." Many of these films are well known in the independent film and festival world, and so when potentially similarly problematic films arrive on a programmer's desk, some programmers are explicitly discussing these cases with filmmakers before agreeing to screen their film. In some cases, these conversations take the shape of ethical vetting discussions, and in other cases, the filmmaker is being prepared to have a public conversation at the festival about the ethics and care involved in the making of their film, where constituent communities may be present and willing and encouraged even to raise concerns and spark direct discourse about ethics and representation in the film. This also, was cited as an example of a healing practice around a film.

Jemma Desai adds another perspective: "What are the benefits of thinking of the festival not as a space of prestige where everything has been vetted and pristinely ethically considered, but as a mirror, to show all the ways that films are made? What would we need in place to have a more robust conversation about whether this is the ecosystem we want? What skills would the festival need to provide? Should we be training facilitators to hold us through this work?"

Some organizations we interviewed have unpacked tangible conflict resolution practices when issues with a film or filmmaker arise from within the audience or surrounding filmmaker community. OTV for example, takes what they refer to as a survivor-centered approach, which is deeply rooted in restorative justice practices. Aymar Jean Christian again: "If survivors feel comfortable coming forward, we center their needs and offer to engage in accountability process, to assess what would be healing from the experience of the person harmed, e.g., should we deny a fellowship or funding, or if the survivor thinks the offending party should be deplatformed. We have done that before, and quite simply, this is an extension of our core values of supporting the most marginalized person in any given situation. If someone has been harmed, then usually they are on the low end of a power imbalance, which necessitates OTV leaning in to support them proportionally more." This philosophy has been made even more tangible this last year with the launch of OTV's ***"Lights Camera Harm"*** project, led by OTV Executive Director, Elijah McKinnon, which is an in depth survey examining the film, television and entertainment industries approach to addressing harm and seeking repair for professionals that are often marginalized by their race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, nationality and/or disability. This is a particularly rare harm reduction and reparation model. As OTV puts it, people often do not engage in survivor-centered and restorative justice approaches because determining what justice looks like is a time- and emotion-intensive process. And it likely needs to be outsourced, which costs money many organizations either don't have or don't want to spend. In fact, it is one

of our core findings that this lack of willingness to engage in and lack of accessibility to restorative justice and harm reduction processes is a massive system-wide problem baked into every aspect of our industry, not just curation. This is why it is important to deconstruct what we mean when we explore the notion of *justice* in curation, define our terms above, determine what shape this kind of justice will take, and how institutions can shift processes to embrace it more fully. This call for restorative justice will be a recurring theme throughout this report.

TOWARD A JUST CURATORIAL ETHOS

As is evident in the section above, the practices of any institution are always a manifestation of its values, however explicit or implicit. It is common for arts institutions (for-profit and non-) to either not codify artistic values or keep them so broad and subjective that they are essentially nonexistent.

It has also been the experience of many of our report's participants that an organization will make statements (internally or externally) containing commitments to certain values which are then never operationalized through process or codified for future use by staff that come after. It is one of our core findings that this lack of documented artistic or curatorial values is among the core barriers to the advancement of just programming practices. After all, the pursuit of justice requires a direct commitment to justice, at the very least for the organization's internal staff.
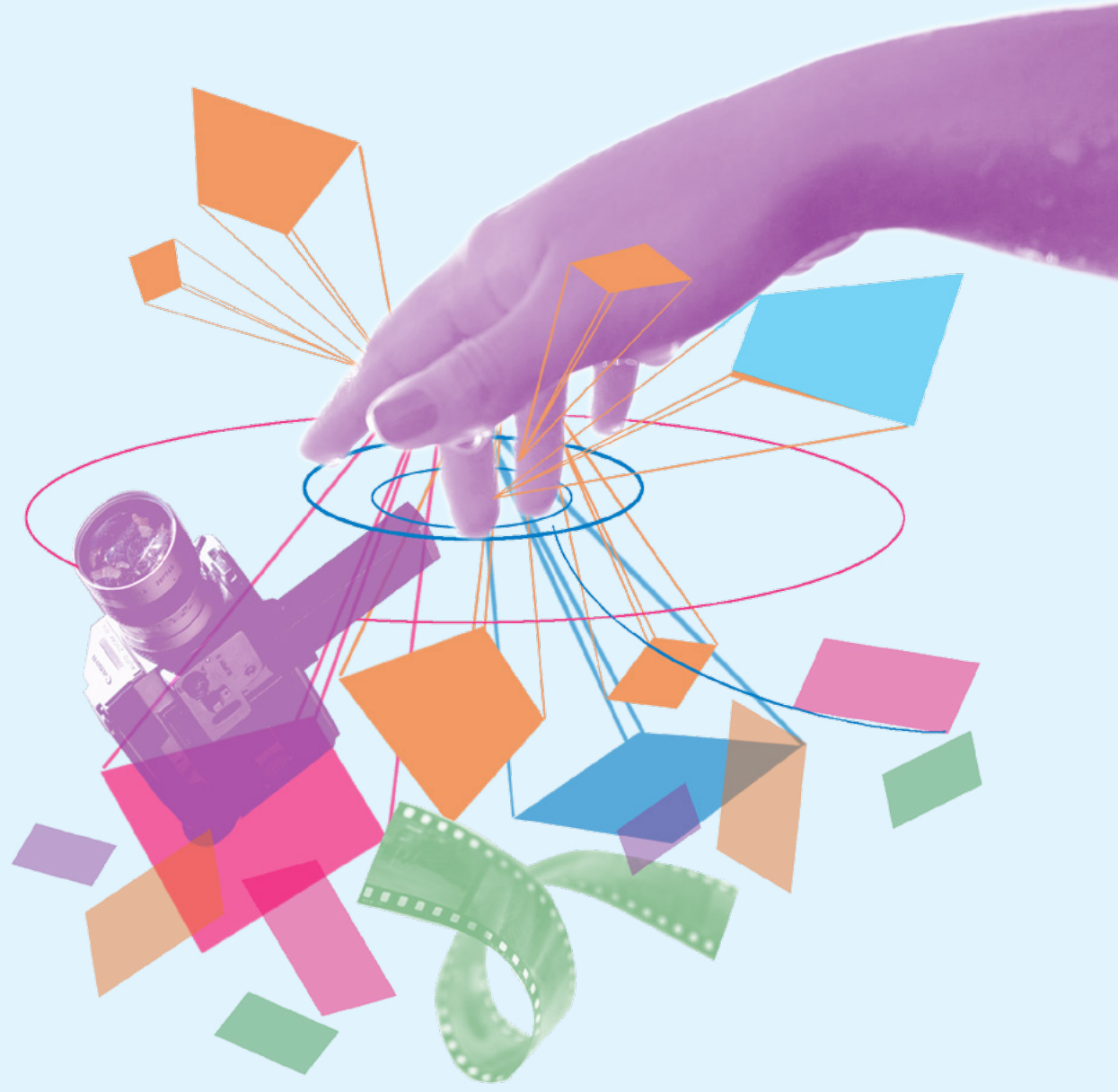
CURATORIAL VALUES STATEMENTS

Several of our participating organizations have gone a step further by not just simply defining their curatorial values and commitments to community responsibility, but also making them publicly available. This simple yet foundational act codifies and concretizes the artistic and political values of these organizations, creates a framework for curation that transcends the personal preferences of individual programmers, and communicates staff intentions clearly and decisively, making them directly accountable to their constituents if and when oversights occur. BlackStar for example, clearly displays on their "About" page, a robust **values statement** that informs not just programming values but operational ones as well. This includes bringing "an analysis of race, gender and power to everything [they] do," being guided by liberation not representation, shifting power, healing personal and generational trauma, and building a new world, all while maintaining a strong programmatic rigor. This commitment to rigor was unpacked further in our discussion as not just an aesthetic rigor, but an ethical one as well, and that this ethical rigor grows out of the understanding of the lineages of work that they are upholding in their programming. Thus authorship and relationship are central to their programming process, and they are constantly asking who is involved in the making of the work in question — an still-too-rare practice that is still deemed radical in several legacy institutions, but when vetting the relation-

ship between a work of art and the community the art depicts, it is essential to understand how the artist is in relationship to that community, and how platforming that artist helps or harms that community. This act of centering the community/audience experience is integral to BlackStar's approach. Festival Director Nehad Khader: "We think deeply about potential audience harm, constantly asking ourselves, how do we prepare audiences to talk about difficult topics? How do you depict stories in a just and caring way?" The team also noted however that this practice becomes increasingly challenging as a festival grows its scope over time.

This audience-centered aspect of curation is also central to the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival (LAAPFF) and its parent organization, Visual Communications (VC). At LAAPFF, a great deal of emphasis is put on identifying the needs and wants of the communities they serve, much of which is the audience. "It's an active relationship throughout the year," says Executive Director Francis Cullado. "We ask how present we are in these spaces before we program. Our mission is to connect filmmakers to communities. Those communities are AANHPI [Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander] in the context of folks of color in Los Angeles and Southern California. So we have to listen to those communities before going into a process of curation, and that starts with a listening process." VC's Sultan Pirzhan adds: "We are community members first, programmers second. We try our best to serve as a connector, from

> *"We are community members first, programmers second. We try our best to serve as a connector, from filmmaker to community and from community to the filmmaker."*
> — Sultan Pirzhan

"We seek work from impassioned storytellers who create from spaces of urgency, importance, and a desire to share their unique perspectives. We counter extractive storytelling by championing regionalism and supporting the creative leadership of those closest to the stories being told."

— **New Orleans Film Festival**

filmmaker to community and from community to the filmmaker." Indeed, the VC team is actively investigating the very use of the term "programmer" to refer to their work, as "the term comes with a notion of personal preference that informs selection — often a preference that many expect to be guided by Industry standards (technical and artistic) of success, which is not really the case at VC." They went on to explain that their success metrics are all qualitative and not quantitative. VC's Eseel Borlasa: "Our success is not determined by the number of humans in a theater, but whether and how they are connecting to the stories." Thus, when vetting films, the programming team notes: "We are not just looking at the quality of the film. We are looking at the artist as well, and that they fit the mission. Will this filmmaker bring joy to our space? If we're going to program a film that might unintentionally fall outside the boundaries of our values, we need to be accountable. And make the filmmakers accountable. If we program a film that surfaces points that don't fully align with our values, we lean into that filmmaker to community convergence in post-screening discussion, careful to hold the audience in care and hold the filmmakers in a learning moment of accountability."" That includes cultivating brave spaces as well, as the team often talks to filmmakers about the needs of their community and potential responses to controversial films, making sure that if a filmmaker is invited in, they are prepared to be accountable to the community for the story they are presenting. It is included in their community agreements, as is the agreement that much like a filmmaking

process, in attending this festival, "you can't just helicopter in. You have to watch other peoples' films and engage with our community." Pirzhan again: "LAAPFF is not your usual film festival, it's a community gathering where we just happen to screen films. Most of the known festivals are industry centric, exclusive, and elitist spaces, where care for audience and community members is not the priority. That's not what we are trying to create and emulate." LAAPFF also has a **robust visioning statement** on their festival website (derived from VC's evolving core values) that they update every year, as part of a multi-year renewal project that involves their own worldbuilding process, wherein they ask critical questions of themselves and their festival, including: "Are we an organization that is an agent of change, or an impediment? Are we doing anti-racist work? Or are we just a cog in a system of media and entertainment? Are we creating community, or are we inflating individual egos? Through these reflections come renewed intentions and desired impact. In our continued challenge to improve and create brave spaces, we have to mitigate extractive practices to make our work more impactful." As with BlackStar's values statement, VC's manifest in festival operations as well, underlining that justice in programming does not exist in a vacuum, but is affected by all aspects of the business of curation.

Another notable example of **public commitments to programming values** is the New Orleans Film Festival, which has a long history of not only uplifting historically marginalized voices
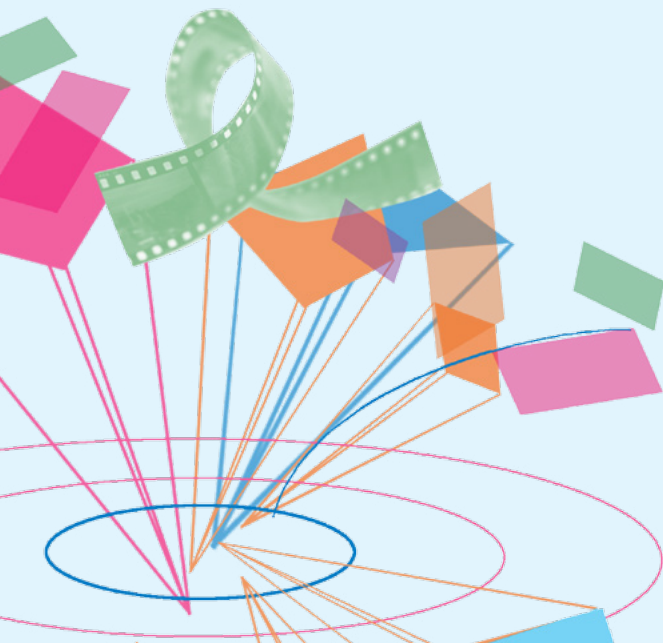
from New Orleans and greater Louisiana, but all across the South via their artist support programs. The process of developing these values began in 2017 when they were expanding the voices on their programming team, and realized there "seemed to be more of an assumed common ground than there really was a guiding set of principles around how programming decisions should be made," says Festival Artistic Director Clint Bowie. These instances included, but were not limited to the organization beginning to track demographics (race, region, etc) in finalist selections and using that data in decisions, then finding that in some sections, that data was not being tracked or discussed at all, much less prioritized, which was a disconnect. The process to develop their shared principles was robust and lengthy, involving heavy participation from full time staff and contract workers. It was challenging and there were staff members who opted out of certain phases of the process, due to capacity, because this work is time consuming and rarely compensated fully. But what resulted is a powerful series of acknowledgments of harmful status quo and commitments to reinvention on an institutional and systemic level. Core tenets include: "We seek work from impassioned storytellers who create from spaces of urgency, importance, and a desire to share their unique perspectives. We counter extractive storytelling by championing regionalism and supporting the creative leadership of those closest to the stories being told." And most notably: "We acknowledge the injustices and deleterious effects of traditional curato-

rial work of arts institutions like our own and seek new ways of envisioning our programmatic practices." This very acknowledgment of the harmful effects of "traditional curation" is significant and NOFF operationalizes it through the interrogation of veiled coded programming criteria such as "artistic merit" and "aesthetic quality," informed by a "racist lineage and hierarchical systems designed to maintain a white, ableist, and hetero-normative perspective on art and the world," as they seek to "expand our understanding of how excellence can reveal itself through artistic approaches and techniques such as language, visual stylings, and culturally-specific storytelling practices that have been historically underappreciated."
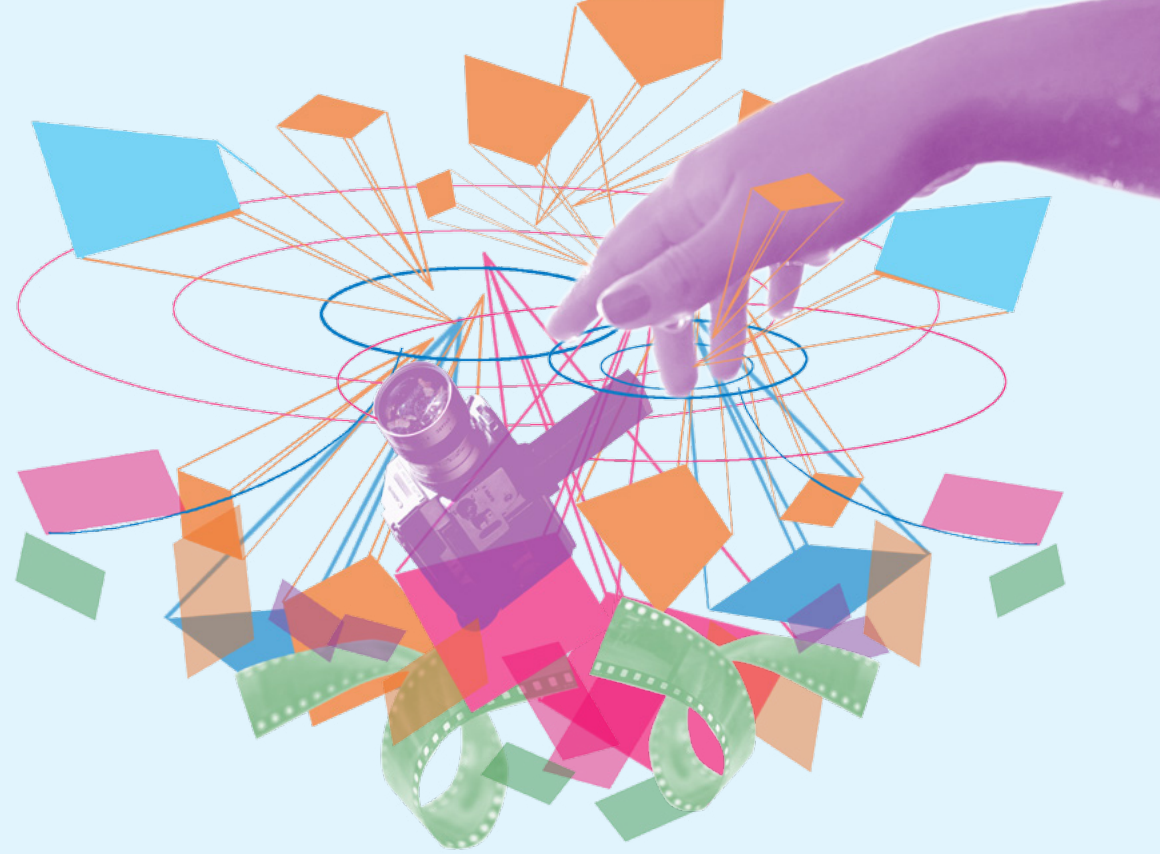
Human Rights Watch Film Festival (HRWFF) takes an audience centered approach in a slightly different manner, due to its being nested within a human rights NGO. They prioritize bringing in audiences directly impacted, or featured in the films themselves. The Festival programming team wrote: "We can't see the film festival as a one-sided or one-directional opportunity to 'inform and engage,' but more as a dialogue where films also reach audiences who have 'skin in the game' and are potentially seeing films that are for and about them, or who have new perspectives to share in the conversations to follow." Thus they take great care to present films that properly represent the community that is featured; as much as possible choosing films directed/produced by someone from that community or region and at minimum someone who has strong ties to that

community, or who has spent considerable time and efforts in engaging that community. It also means centering the same people in their post-film discussions. The team writes: "Thinking of the audience not only as the people needing to be informed, but also composed of the people directly impacted, means responsibility in what we show, and how we show it. If it is traumatizing material that will hit close-to-home, how are we supporting that audience by showing it and/or after the screening? Is the film we are programming doing more damage, or offering an opportunity for healing and exposure? Is the film going to help them in some way?" After these inquiries, they noted that if any ethical questions at all remain about a film, it is not programmed. Again, these values and priorities are manifestations of the unique roots of the organization as a human rights non-profit, where it straddles the film community and the NGO community. And yet, these values are perhaps not so different from the supposed values of many arts organizations with mission statements regarding the power of storytelling to represent communities and make the world a better place. The difference is, HRWFF has operationalized that mission statement into tangible practices.

This act of codifying clear curatorial values frameworks that can hold organizations accountable for their programmatic choices is by all accounts rare within larger institutions. Veteran programmer and co-founder of the Programmers of Colour Collective (POC2),

Lucy Mukerjee explains simply that "big festivals lack clear and codified values. I've never worked at an organization that had clear artistic values. As the Programming Director of Outfest, I created my own, but other large festivals had little sense of responsibility or any belief in a need for artistic values, because they are not purpose driven. They exist to support films that will sell — sell tickets and sell to distributors."

Themba Bhebhe, also a co-founder of POC2 and Diversity and Inclusion Head at the European Film Market (EFM) notes that in his experience many organizations often feel that hiring a culturally diverse team of programmers is sufficient to manifest a just curatorial practice. "But true curatorial justice means going beyond having historically marginalized groups in the decision-making process, and looking at the conditions on set, asking whether a story or process is extractive or appropriative, asking how much agency and involvement do the protagonist communities have, what kind of accountability or protection exists, are there toxic dynamics on set, and so on. These interrogations matter, and can have a structural impact upstream. For example, if a film doesn't pass muster, then it shouldn't be programmed and thus that will impact distribution, and influence funding/philanthropy. Curatorial justice is also about curating more films centering the colonial incidents where colonized people won, of which there are many, but we don't know that. Happy stories about marginalized groups that are not trauma based. For example, a vast many Black folks like myself don't want to see movies about ancestral trauma. We need to be curating through a lens of how a community wants to be seen on screen, not just what looks entertaining from the outside."

LESSONS FROM DISABILITY JUSTICE

Themba's articulation of curating in accordance with the way a community wants to be represented hearkens to another perspective made by Lucy Mukerjee during one of our worldbuilding sessions. She noted: "When it comes to film programming, I ascribe to the tenet 'nothing about us without us.' When programming a film about a community, the background of the filmmaker and their perspective on and engagement with the community in front of the camera matters. That goes for curation as well, in that there needs to be a programmer in the room that is a member of the community upon which the story is centered. How else can programmers gauge the authenticity of a story or the potential harm it might create, if told irresponsibly?"

Indeed, this very tenet, "nothing about us without us," originally created within the disability justice movement, was directly referenced by Jason Dasilva, founder and Executive Director of AXS Lab and its AXS Fund, which exists to disburse development and production grants to films helmed by BIPOC filmmakers with disabilities. As Jason notes, the fund arose from a stark lack of visibility of filmmakers of color within disability-focused spaces, and the manner in which the dynamics of intersectionality at play for BIPOC filmmakers with disabilities make it especially difficult for them to garner support for their films, and thus have their stories heard and understood by a wider audience, which directly impacts the lived experiences of these individuals. Dasilva: "People with disabilities need to be creating work about people with disabilities and people with disabilities need to be on staff curating stories about people with disabilities. It is that simple. And not just as consultants, and not just for a couple months to make selections on a program, but on an ongoing basis." Indeed, Dasilva is one of the only organizational leaders engaging in curatorial work that is a person of color with a disability, and additionally one of the rare disability-centered arts organizations with an intersectional priority of supporting artists of color. He spoke at length about the very long and very problematic history of stories programmed in one way or another, about people with disabilities, that were told from the outside, and the way in which that lack of accurate and authentic experience has directly impeded social and political progress for people with disabilities and especially people of color with disabilities. Thus, the existence of AXS Lab and the AXS Fund is an act of curatorial justice, designed to represent these intersectional stories responsibly. Indeed, much of the work of just and equitable curation is deeply informed by and built upon the foundation of and the lessons from the disability justice movement, which begins with the acknowledgment that every community holds the inherent right of self determination — in the creation of laws and policies that will protect and uphold them, and in the creation of stories that will manifest their lived experiences to the world. Curation cannot and does not exist in a political vacuum.

> *"There needs to be a programmer in the room that is a member of the community upon which the story is centered. How else can programmers gauge the authenticity of a story or the potential harm it might create, if told irresponsibly?"*
>
> — **Lucy Mukerjee**
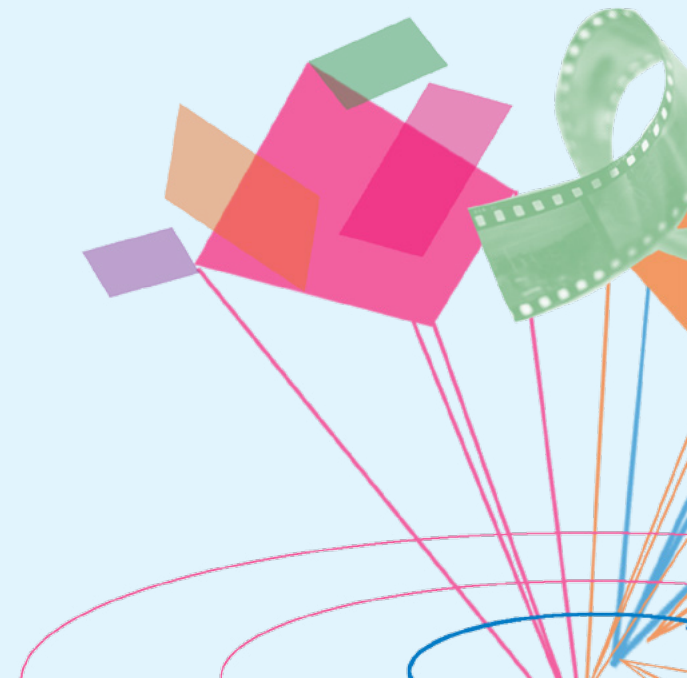
Co-founder and President of values-driven production company Multitude Films, Jessica Devaney also spoke at length about the inextricable nature of curation and politics in her powerful article for Documentary Magazine in February 2022: "While our industry has made some recent strides when it comes to familiarity with principles of responsible authorship and representation, we have a lot of work ahead to implement and apply those learnings. One place of influence where we need crucial shifts is within programming teams at top-tier festivals who have an outsized influence in determining the size and scope of the audience a film can reach. Festival programming teams often—and by design—work in a vacuum, judging films solely on "artistic merit" without considering the broader cultural and political context, sometimes ignoring the fact that the programmers' implicit biases are shaped by our dominant cultural and political narratives that innately inform their artistic judgment." Thus mistakes are inevitable. HRWFF Director John

Biaggi: "Every film festival in existence, particularly those that have been around for decades, have made multiple curatorial errors. There are films, in immediate retrospect, or looking at them now from years of distance, and with a new perspective that has grown out of events and evolving concerns and ideas of the past five to ten years, that we should not have programmed." Biaggi's observation is a refreshingly simple and yet shockingly rare one. It is undeniable that cultural competency will shift and evolve over time, as society evolves. Naturally the collective perspective on what is "appropriate" or "problematic" will change as communities do. Thus, a story that may have been lauded for its representational achievements twenty or ten or even five years ago may be today considered harmful. These filmmaking — and by extension, curatorial — oversights that reveal themselves over the long view of culture are inevitable, and yet as noted earlier in this report, the acknowledgment of filmmaking and programming oversights, the act of

holding oneself responsible and accountable for such harmful cultural proliferation, *is extremely rare,* almost completely unheard of.

Full Spectrum Features, and its Founder and President, Eugene Sun Park, are a rare exception. They are currently working on codifying their organizational values and being public about them in a similar way to those referenced above, and this process grows out of their mission of advancing systemic change. "Our values are rooted in humility. We don't know what we don't know. Our constituent communities know a lot more than we do, so our job is to listen. We have to cultivate a culture of learning and listening. We are all beginners, so we need to take a beginner's mindset. Full Spectrum has produced seven features and there is more that we don't know than we do know. Things in this industry and in this world change so rapidly that what I do know changes in five minutes, so my interest is in collaborating and learning from each other."

The collective perspective on what is "appropriate" or "problematic" will change as communities do. Thus, a story that may have been lauded for its representational achievements twenty or ten or even five years ago may be today considered harmful.

ON DISTRIBUTION

As noted early on, these curatorial observations and provocations do not merely apply to film festivals alone, which is why we focused our research to include non-profits that curate grants, labs, fellowships, etc. But even this wider framing omits perhaps the most important curatorial force in the cultural marketplace, the commercial distributor. The sheer scale of audience reach — and thus, potential audience uplift or harm — easily dwarfs the size of the audience at even the largest film festivals. Thus, these provocations around community responsibility, audience-centered approaches, and curation as narrative change are all applicable — and even more urgently-needed — at the corporate level.

Eugene Sun Park again: "The entire ecosystem of filmmaking is broken in every corner. A root cause analysis of the lack of authentic representation of communities on camera yields that this is the end result of systems of exclusion in many less visible areas earlier in the pipeline. That's why we moved into the festival and exhibition space. Our first feature was *Signature Move*, which cleaned up on the queer film circuit, selling out screenings in very big theaters. But all the sales agents and distribution executives and press we talked to didn't think the film had big audience potential. And they were all cis straight white men. So clearly there is an issue with the fact that the only folks gatekeeping the way to film distribution are homogenous."

This root cause analysis is echoed in comments from Maikiko James, Director of Programs for Women In Film (WIF), who has long been a staunch advocate and agent for systemic reinvention and disruption at the corporate level in Hollywood. "At WIF, we do think intentionally about how to over-index in support of artists from historically marginalized communities in our curatorial processes, but even so, there are also systemic barriers to the benefits that WIF is able to deliver. That is why we are branching our activities away from artist support programs, and trying to also address systemic issues, like homogenous leadership at studios, which affects the authenticity of stories that are told, who tells them, and how sustainable that practice is. When you look at who is hired in Hollywood to tell stories to the widest possible audiences, it's largely cis het white men. If that curatorial practice isn't disrupted in a fundamental way, the same narratives from dominant cultures will perpetuate and uphold the old status quo at the expense of the rest of us. That's why the **_Pay Up Hollywood_** project is important. That's why the **_ReFrame stamp_** is an important part of advocacy. That's why the **_WIF Help Line_** is important. We are actively trying to manifest spaces in Hollywood where people are safe and cared for while working to create a story, because that is also an act of community responsibility. Sustainable and enjoyable careers in Hollywood are the goals, full stop."

As explored in the original *Restoring the Future* report, a great deal of these exclusionary and extractive commercial filmmaking practices are rooted in (and vehicles to perpetuate) capitalist, patriarchal and white supremacist principles that essentially boil down to a scarcity mindset — that despite the billions of dollars of profit generated by the film industry writ large, there are not enough resources available to loosen the bottlenecked pipeline to allow in greater numbers those artists that have been historically marginalized for generations. To this, Color Congress Co-Director Sahar Driver articulates beautifully: "Not only is this perspective myopic in that it ignores massive audiences, but it leaves considerable money on the table, and curates in ways that at best do nothing to advance culture and society." Thus, how do more progressive distribution models invert this scarcity-based curatorial model and instead reroot its practices through a mindset of abundance and pluralist intention?

Open Television (OTV) is an impressive prototype. Co-founder Aymar Jean Christian: "So many of our social divisions are about not knowing each other, and we are a segregated society. But the fundamentals of solidarity are about understanding each other, not finding sameness, which erases our differences. That's why we wanted to build a justice centered media incubator for those most marginalized, folks that need to be heard because media organizations have a responsibility as producers of culture to center justice and center a vision of society that they

are either promoting or depowering." Indeed, Christian and Co-founder / Executive Director Elijah McKinnon were particularly interested in manifesting a justice-centered distribution company. Christian again: "Distributors are the most important gatekeepers in the industry, and often tend to segment identity, thus ignoring and misunderstanding intersectionality, which directly impedes public opinion and understanding of intersectional lived experiences." That led Christian and McKinnon to want to proportionally support those who are most marginalized, in order to promote wider understanding for the public good. Thus, their initial curatorial tenets were anti-curatorial. Christian: "In the early/beta years of OTV, I didn't give notes on scripts or say no to anyone. We met with literally everyone who reached out. And we distributed everything except feature films — mainly because that wasn't really TV, and we had to guard our capacity. And whatever stage artists were at, we would focus on just helping them get to the next stage. We developed a database of grants to help folks get funding, we introduced people to crew, and we showcased all of their works on the platform."

As with other justice-centered practices we've noted earlier, these practices became more challenging as the organization grew in scale and thus required modification. But nevertheless, the model is impressive in its inversion of traditional distribution principles and intentionally seeking to proliferate as many underrepresented voices as possible through the platform. Partic-

ularly since OTV artists have gone on to receive Emmy, Webby, Gotham, and Streamy wins and nominations, have resulted in development deals with HBO, Lionsgate, and Hulu, and the organization's operating budget and funder pool has grown exponentially since its original inception in 2015 as a research project housed at Northwestern University. If nothing else, the example of OTV highlights the manner in which a double bottom line — e.g., maximizing financial gain and community responsibility — is not only possible for commercial distributors, but potentially very profitable.

Values-driven models to achieve a double bottom line are also by no means restricted to exhibition, and equally applicable earlier in the life cycle of a film, such as production and even development. Multitude Films is a poignant example, where Founder Jessica Devaney and Vice President Anya Rous sought to, as Rous stated, "make films that have something meaningful to say about critical issues of our time, and we wanted them to be made responsibly and ethically, and bring movement thinking into how we function as a production company in order to push industry norms toward justice and equity and representation." As a result, their project curation process includes building impact into their filmmaking process, building movement relationships before production to avoid misguided "parachuting" into communities where they are not already rooted, and thinking about cultivating impact producers from within movements. Addi-

tionally instructive are some of their methods in prototyping and evolving models for cultivating a community of culturally abundant below-the-line staff through apprenticeships, or hiring project producers as staff, and salaried, utilizing different producing models.

These methods, while here applied to the processes of production, are indicative of how movement thinking applied to disrupt the long-held status quo of employment practices across a variety of sectors can bring greater sustainability and impact and is worthy of experimentation and proliferation more widely.
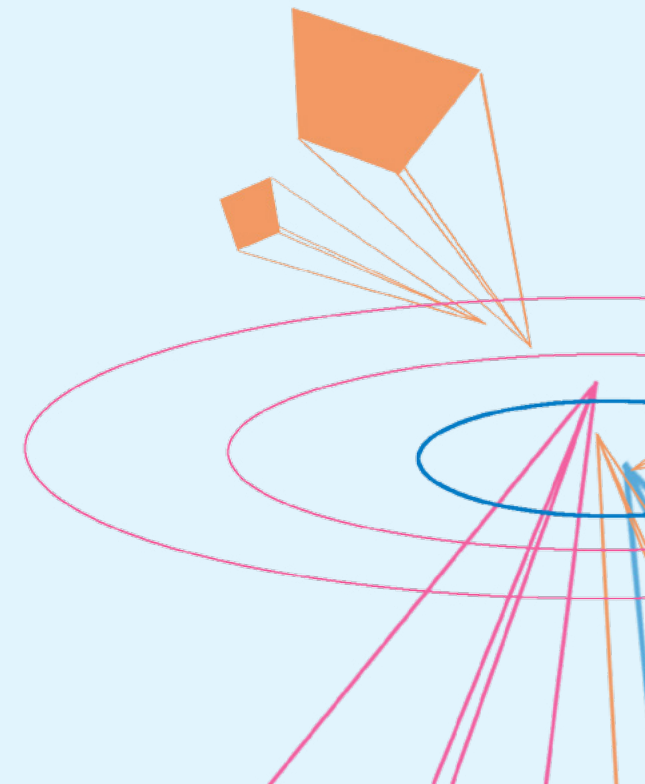
FROM VALUES TO PRACTICE

As explored through the experiences of the above participants, curatorial justice begins with deep engagement with audience and community, codified values and commitments to artistic and ethical rigor, and intentional focus on disrupting the perpetuation of systems of exclusion and harm. We will now explore how these values and commitments manifest as tangible daily practices for programmers and curatorial organizations.
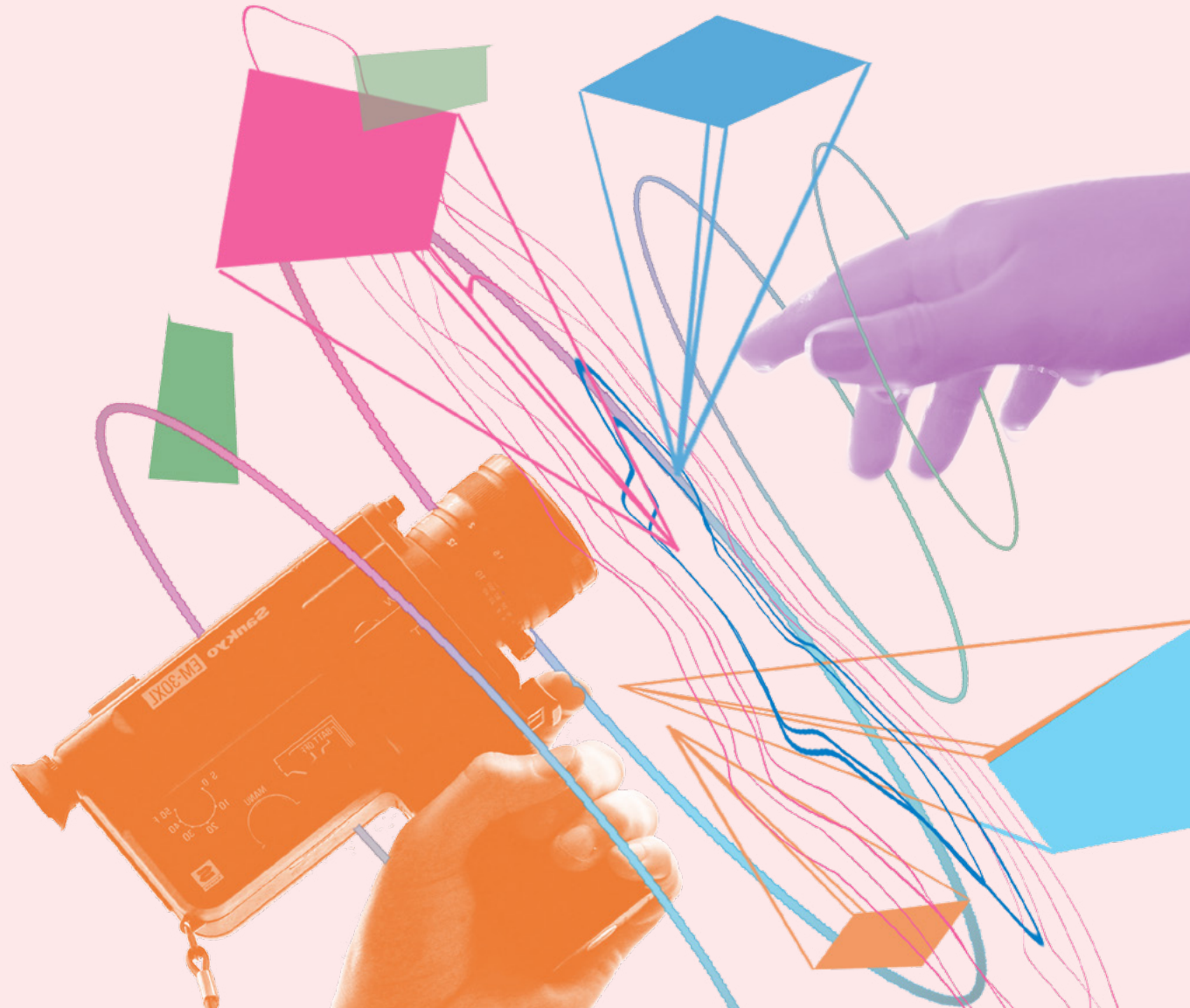
COMMUNITY-ENGAGED REVIEW

A wide survey of general programming processes across all our participating organizations reveals a general consistency of some practices. In most (though not all) cases, open submissions of films are reviewed by a team of screeners, or interns, or volunteers. The employment bases for these larger teams of initial curators varies greatly depending on the resources of the organization, but there is general consistency in that few organizations (if any) are fully resourced to equitably remunerate these initial reviewers for their considerable labor, despite best attempts to do so. Thus, while films from priority communities or films raising authorship or ethical questions are flagged for more experienced programming staff, the majority of values-driven programmatic practices are administered closer to the midpoint

of the curatorial timeline, when programming staff receive a reduced slate of submissions for deeper review. Additionally, several festivals interviewed explained that their screeners, whether volunteer or compensated, are in several cases not film professionals, but rather community members that are film lovers and aficionados. This is notable and refreshing, given that several programmers we spoke with detailed at length the environment of elitism that permeated the programming climates of many larger festivals and legacy cultural organizations. For example, the New Orleans Film Festival (NOFF), the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF), BlackStar, and CAAMFest all bring community members that are non-film professionals into their programming process, underlining the prioritization of constituent communities and an audience-forward approach in action. NOFF Artistic Director

Clint Bowie: "Bringing them into the process really helps us understand how films will play locally. It's about having the audience curate the program they will be watching."

Exceptions to this practice emerged in conversation with some participants, however the result was often the same — a tremendous amount of labor being held by the programming staff. For example, despite not receiving open submissions (and instead soliciting submissions entirely through outreach), HRWFF still receives hundreds of submissions, which still necessitates the use of a volunteer screening committee, though that is a practice they are currently revisiting. Conversely, LAAPFF for example does not utilize volunteers at all (as a matter of ethics), resulting in staff programmers or stipended screeners reviewing everything submitted.

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DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSES AT WORK

Many of the programming leaders we interviewed indicated that filmmaker demographics are continually assessed on an ongoing basis, and that authorship is a consistent point of discussion in all programming meetings. A critical mechanism for these assessments lies in the submission paperwork from the film team, which may take various forms, from an artistic statement to a question on the online application, but its purpose is the same — to hear the filmmakers themselves in their own words describe their relationship to the community at the center of the story they are telling. Without this filmmaker-submitted statement, authorship and ethics are virtually impossible to assess, indicating the foundational significance of this tool. Of course, this is not a vetted document and could contain fabrications, but nevertheless, its existence is an important move toward curatorial justice.

Different organizations took different approaches to ensuring their programming slates were representative of their constituent communities. Interestingly, very few organizations expressed that they used tangible quotas for any community. Quotas aside, many film festivals identified priority communities that they seek to represent robustly and regularly. For example, the BlackStar programming team noted that while they do not use benchmarks for any community, Black women are a programming priority, as are Queer filmmakers. They also prioritize transgender voices

and filmmakers with disabilities, though in both of these cases, submissions tend to be much lower. Festival Director Nehad Khader: "We also periodically just step back and review the program and ask who is missing overall. And if all else is equal, scoring-wise, if we are choosing between two similar films, we intentionally choose the film from the filmmaker that is from a more marginalized community. And we similarly prioritize native voices over outsider voices." The team also noted years where certain priority communities, such as filmmakers in US-occupied territories like Hawaiʻi and Puerto Rico were not well represented in the open submissions, so they actively outreached to seek them out and program their films. Khader again: "As a festival that has decolonization called out in its core values, it is important for us to program films from US-occupied territories as often as possible." Similarly, the Hawaiʻi International Film Festival is also particularly attentive to the cultural dynamics of their curation, and assesses cultural demographics heavily, because of the unique cross pollination of cultural interests, according to Artistic Director Anderson Le.

Festivals rooted in Indigeneity like Māoriland Film Festival take similar approaches to priority communities. Māoriland Festival Director, Madeleine Hakaraia de Young stated: "Cultural demographics are considered throughout the programming process — from submissions through to selection. We are constantly evaluating the mix and make-up of the programme. And where the eligibility of a submitter is unclear, we will always
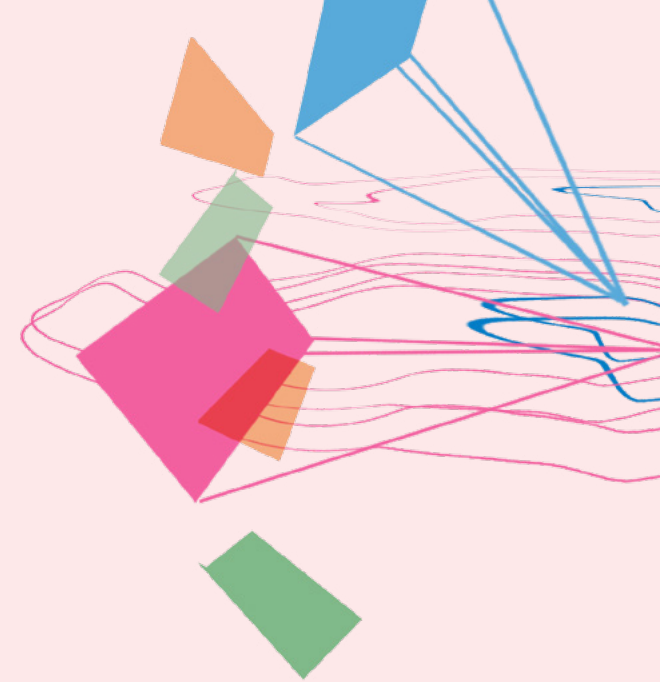
"if we are choosing between two similar films, we intentionally choose the film from the filmmaker that is from a more marginalized community. And we similarly prioritize native voices over outsider voices."

— Nehad Khader

This process of ensuring that no one individual from a community is the sole gatekeeper assessing the authenticity or potential harm of a film is important, as it allows for an informed discussion around not just who is telling the story, but whose voice is centered in the film.

follow up with the submitter to clarify eligibility." Here the notion of eligibility refers to whether significant members of a film's creative team identify as Indigenous, which in cases where film creatives are not legally recognized members of certain nations, may require consultation with elders and community leaders of those nations. This "Indigenous-led" metric is critical to preserving authorial sovereignty, which is of great importance for the Indigenous-led festivals we spoke with. These eligibility frameworks that exist at community-specific film festivals and are not typically in place at legacy festivals run by predominantly white institutions are worthy of expansion and adoption on a universal scale. For even when demographic vetting is not necessary to ascertain eligibility, it is a potentially transformative tool in the hand of the programmer to assess the point-of-view and thus potential community impact of the film. For example, there were films cited by our participants as having been characterized "Indigenous films" in the programming guides of legacy film festivals where they screened, despite having no Indigenous filmmakers on the core creative team and no vetting process by which to determine that was the case. Unsurprisingly, these films were subject to great scrutiny and concern from Indigenous communities upon being exhibited.

Many interviewees also spoke at length about the significance of a plurality of perspectives on every film. That often includes getting multiple programmer voices from within the community at the center of the film (not just one) to vet the film for authenticity. VC's Eseel Borlasa: "Even when there is a programmer who is a part of the community in question, a film goes through multiple community members to vet for lived experience. I've asked my parents to watch some submissions with me. Because we are not every human in the world. Maybe I love a film, but I need someone else to watch it to make sure I'm not romanticizing or exoticizing it, based on my lived experience." NOFF's Clint Bowie reaffirms this practice as well: "Even in the screener phase of review, staff leads are very intentional about who is being assigned what film, specifically in order to gauge authenticity. Because for example, we can't just have one Black screener to represent the entirety of all Black communities in curation. It's not realistic or fair."

This process of ensuring that no one individual from a community is the sole gatekeeper assessing the authenticity or potential harm of a film is important. Interviewees expressed that it allows for an informed discussion around not just who is telling the story, but whose voice is centered in the film. HRWFF also investigates these questions deeply in their programming process. They write: "We try to analyze the ethical approach behind the filmmaking process – is there seemingly a healthy dynamic between participants and filmmaker? Is there re-traumatization without agency, or use of explicit material without intent or purpose?"

EXTERNAL ALLIES TO CURATION

HRWFF's programming process was particularly interesting to us, because of the unique nature of the parent organization, Human Rights Watch, and its wide array of subject matter experts and ethics specialists on staff. The team shared: "We have an HRW researcher with knowledge of the subject matter review each film. As HRW is a global organization working in over 90 countries with a staff of 600, it is very rare that we encounter a film that our researchers are not equipped to review. In the rare instances that this occurs, we get a recommendation from knowledgeable HRW staff of an outside organization or individual expert they know who can review that film." This robust ethical vetting practice was impressive to learn about. It's significant, in that it is the single most expansive case we encountered in our research of programmers systematically bringing external subject matter experts in the review of every film.

Of course, such a process is not easily replicable within film festivals that do not have such large parent company infrastructure. But what if such a body did exist — perhaps one that was independent and accessible to a variety of organizations, or the field at large? And what if festivals were resourced to consult with the independent body on a regular basis as a matter of standard operating procedure? How might that shift the burden of ethical vetting away from programmers and onto a community of specialists specifically trained to do so?

In the meantime, however, without such a resource, many of the organizations I spoke with implemented a version of an external ethical review process, when that additional vetting was necessary. For example, Māoriland notes that " the Indigenous Film Circle has created our own ecosystem that connects from time to time. Within this ecosystem are trusted community partners who are invited to contribute their perspective on films from their region." Additionally, HIFF Artistic Director, Anderson Le: "We do engage external community partners or subject matter experts when vetting selections that feature communities not represented on our staff. For example, we did a Muslim filmmakers section some years ago and reached out to the University of Hawai'i and other Muslim groups, primarily from Indonesia and the Philippines, for consultation and outreach." BlackStar Festival Director Nehad Khader noted that "we don't always have the ability to assess ethics broadly, but that we are bringing in external voices to help vet a film if the community does not have representation on the programming team and we aren't shy about asking folks to help, because if it was a film about my community, I would want to be asked. But we can do more." CAAM Director of Programs Don Young spoke about CAAMFest's long standing practice of partnering with Pacific Islanders in Communications (PIC) on programming PI-centered films. "We should not program a film about NHPI [Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander] communities without consulting PIC." LAAPFF adds further that this is why they need to be so community rooted, to center the needs of their community in what they program, because they need to be able to reach out to external culture bearers for guidance and be trusted that they will take the advice of those culture bearers seriously.
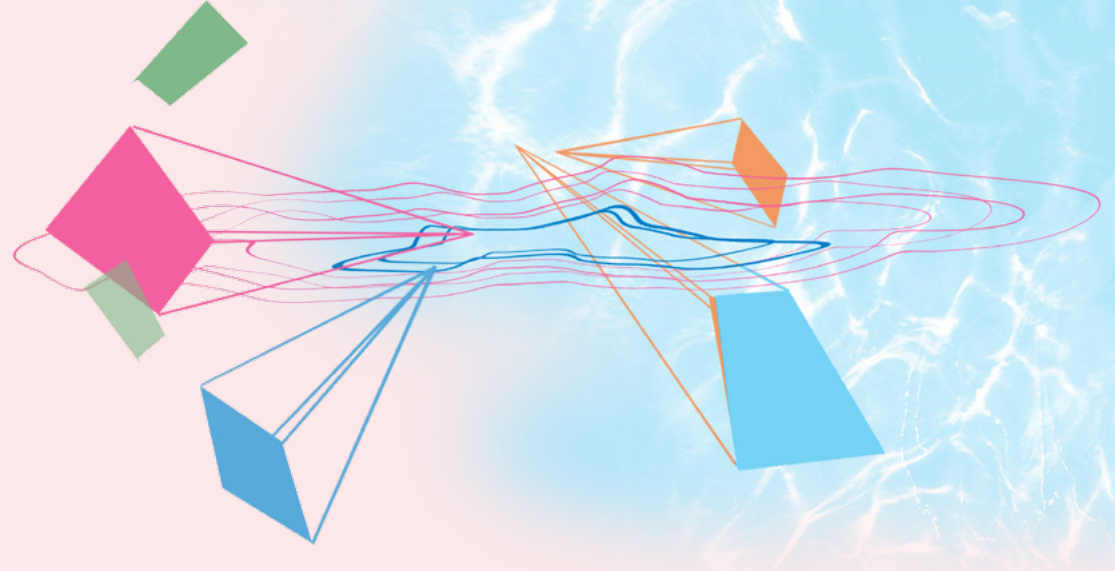
EMPOWERING YOUNGER CURATORS

Another important dynamic common within those programming teams interviewed is the manner in which they are cultivating junior staff and younger perspectives in their curatorial processes. For example, it was exceedingly rare among those programmers we interviewed for final decisions to be made by one or two individuals. Decisions were often cited as being made collectively. Several interviewees spoke directly about their intentions to deconstruct hierarchy and foster lateral decision-making processes. For Māoriland Film Festival, this practice is guided by the Māori principle of Tuakana-Teina, in which tuakana, or more experienced filmmakers, interact with teina, emerging filmmakers. Festival Director Madeleine Hakaraia de Young: "In a Tuakana-Teina relationship, the knowledge and experiences of both the tuakana and teina are acknowledged and celebrated. Tuakana-Teina is a practice that dissolves artificial barriers to collaboration and mitigates some of the toxicity within the industry. It compels those working together to create safe learning and work environments where the mana of all involved is respected. It is a tikanga for intergenerational success."

For some festivals, this process of systematizing younger voices in the room has increasingly taken the shape of Programming Fellowships. In the case of Outfest Fusion, former Outfest Festival Directors Lucy Mukerjee and later Faridah Gbadamosi both turned over the reins

of the Fusion programming process to a cohort of younger QTBIPOC programmers or aspiring programmers. Gbadamosi: "We designed the fellowship to be something that can exist alongside a full time job, and they programmed the entire Fusion festival. They did all the intros and Q&A's, and wrote the film descriptions. Because the only way to fix curatorial problems is to change who's doing the curating."

The Vancouver Queer Film Festival put on by Out on Screen, also recently launched their Programming Disruptor Fellowship, a game-changing training and mentorship initiative for emerging BIPOC 2SLGBTQIA+ film curators, led by Out On Screen's Artistic Director, Charlie Hidalgo: "This Fellowship aims to be a catalyst for transformative change in the Canadian film industry, shepherding new talent into a field that is in critical need of diversification, in order to further

the dignity, liberty, and justice of BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities."

Through the fellowship, three emerging film programmers who identify as BIPOC 2SLGBTQIA+ receive $10,000 and the opportunity to be an integral part of the curation of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. They detail further that the compensation is "based on an hourly wage of $24.08/hour + 4% vacation and wellness and networking funds. Selected Fellows are credited as Festival Programmers, and by the end of the program will have acquired a practical toolkit and a robust ethical framework that will enable them to approach their curatorial practice in a restorative and impactful way, centering accountability, integrity and community care."

Full Spectrum Features, which is not a film festival, but a production and distribution com-

pany, also launched a Film Festival Leadership Lab some years back which also provides a vital support structure. Company President Eugene Sun Park: "From what we've experienced in relationships with film festivals, we have seen first hand that it's not beneficial to throw people into Festival Director roles unless they've received training and the middle level for years. But many BIPOC folks are not supported at that level. So we partnered with the Film Festival Alliance to start a program that does that. We felt that if we can mentor and train 8 to 10 professionals that are BIPOC and from underrepresented genders every year as a cohort, spread across the country, then they can support each other and build connections and solidarity across various festivals. Unfortunately, we launched the program during the pandemic, and Film Festival Alliance was rebooting its leadership and programming, so we put the program on pause to retool the program a bit further for more meaningful impact."

What is perhaps most compelling about these relatively new programs is not just that they are training and diversifying a new generation of programmers with tangible actionable experience that will create greater professional opportunities in the future for those supported, but that they are also teaching a new and more progressive, community-forward philosophy of programming, free from the vestiges of elitism and extractive community relationships. This is especially radical and necessary.
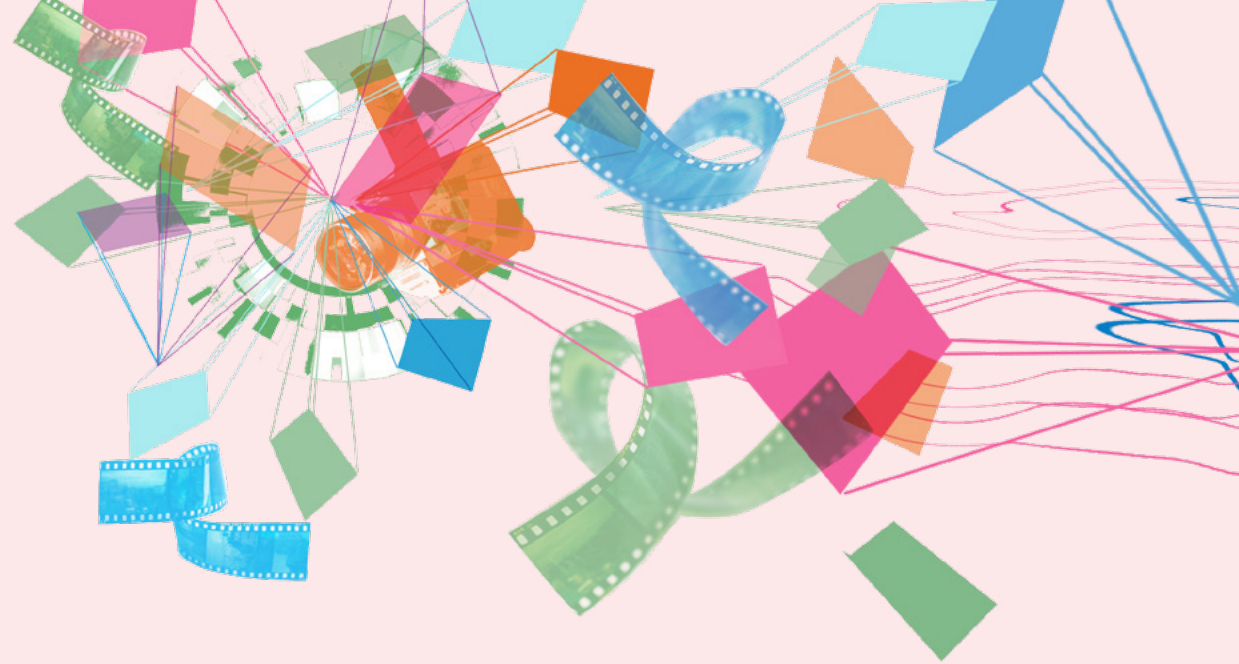
JUST OPERATIONAL PRAXIS

As alluded to above, it is important to underline that justice-centered festival practices are of course not limited to the process of curation. Curation of a film festival or any other exhibition venture exists within an ecosystem of operations that can either uplift those values even further or detract from them. Critical operational considerations, such as accessibility, childcare, pay structures for staff, screening fees for filmmakers, speaker fees, and the dismantling of generally toxic culture have also been woven into the values and practices of our participating organizations, and many stated explicitly that this work is ongoing. For example, BlackStar cites child care for festival participants as a manifestation of their aforementioned artistic and ethical rigor, as

is accessibility technology like audio description and open captions and that disability justice as a core value underpinning all its operations. For many, including LAAPFF, justice manifests as low ticket prices for both online and in-person screenings, and a pay-what-you-can structure to programming, including opening night, and stipends for Festival staff to be able to eat and care for themselves appropriately during what many interviewees referred to as a traumatic period. VC Executive Director Francis Cullado again: "Film festivals are traumatic. A lot of things can go wrong. There's always a fire to put out and we always have to perform. I am always asking, how much more, as people, can we take from this? How can we become more of a space of healing?" These factors contributed to the reinvention of LAAPFF's C3 conference and panel

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programming (previously a series of professional development talks and workshops) into R3, or **R3NEWAL,** a series of restorative activities and gatherings to connect peoples as themselves, instead of our titles as artists and creators."

In regards to revenue sharing, many participants were particularly vocal also. Faridah Gbadamosi again: "At Outfest Fusion, it was very important to us that all the filmmakers got stipends, including shorts filmmakers. Festivals need to be building toward paying fees to filmmakers, and large organizations and their leadership are aghast for reasons that make no justifiable sense." HRWFF's team wrote: "We have revenue sharing of our

online components with our cinema partners (which we began at the start of the pandemic to help support the cinemas and have continued given the slow return of audiences to in person screenings). We offer both screening fees to every film in our programs and travel honorariums (covering roundtrip airfare, hotel/airbnb accommodations, and a daily stipend) to all filmmakers we invite to our festivals. We offer speaker honorariums to every external panelist (including film participants but exempting the filmmakers). Speaker honorariums are important to ensure we aren't furthering the practice of extractive storytelling or benefiting from expertise that is historically and continually under-compensated."

Thankfully, practices such as these are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, even at larger legacy festivals. However our industry lacks a clear and field-wide standard rate for fees like this, so the possibilities are still open for organizational undercutting and extractive economic models where filmmakers have no choice but to pay out of pocket to participate in those festivals that have historically demonstrated the most potential for professional growth dynamics, despite the fact that there are no guarantees that they will sell their film for a fee that will allow them to recoup these scarce resources.

A CALL FOR RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

As I wrote in a piece for Color Congress in January 2023, our entire media arts industry has an accountability problem. The institutions that make up this field do exceptional work uplifting artists individually and collectively, yet inevitable oversights occur. And it is in the handling of these inevitable, understandable, yet still harmful oversights that many of our artist support organizations fall short. This is not a condemnation. Far from it.

The reality is that the creation of harm is an unfortunate yet inevitable side effect of living in the world — organizations are made up of humans, and humans err, in spite of good intentions and honorable mission statements.

Thus there should be no shame in acknowledging harm (as it is beyond human ability to control), as long as individuals and organizations are willing to hold themselves accountable — because no external force can in reality 'make' anyone else accountable for anything they don't want to be held accountable for — and take commensurate reparative action. And it is in this act of reparation — the centering of harm that a community has experienced, and the willingness to put the public image of the organization second to the wellbeing of its constituents — that many artist support organizations are failing us. Calls for greater accountability in the film industry are by no means new, and solutions have been well designed and advanced by those in the **[Documentary Accountability Working Group, Detroit Narrative Agency,](#)** and others, as it regards reorienting the relationship between community and filmmaker. However, these same concepts of harm reduction also carry through to the curator, a notion which again is a cultural shift from today's common expectations. Our institutions are not yet accustomed to acknowledging the perpetration of harm, and we have seen over the last few years the way in which this damages relationships between

institutions and their constituents, and creates barriers to healing within impacted communities. Yet this need not be so.

This Curatorial Justice Project is one of the ways in which Restoring the Future hopes to co-create frameworks for practices across a variety of sectors in the media arts field that center harm reduction and utilize restorative justice practices to, perhaps most importantly, dismantle the stigma of institutional harm and find pathways and processes to facilitate healing between organizations and their constituents.

To that end, Restoring the Future recently engaged in a lengthy training process and partnership with restorative justice practitioners Red Sea Road Consulting, led by its founder, Sidney Morgan, to begin to prototype just such a process for harm reduction and repair between arts institutions and the communities they serve, for inclusion here in this report. This training and partnership was made possible by the Color Congress' groundbreaking 2022 investments in its member organizations by providing resources and trainings like this for those whose operating budgets were too lean to do so on their own. This in and of itself is a useful example of how field-wide investment models can be prototyped further to fill the various gaps in support that traditional funding models do not reach.

We will begin with an overview for those readers that are less familiar with restorative justice in concept or in practice, before we detail a possi-

ble structure for a restorative justice process for arts institutions and their constituents. However, this structural framework should be considered a beginning, a point of departure, for institutional leaders across all sectors of the media arts industry, nonprofit and for-profit alike, for discussion and implementation within their walls *only with the support of trained restorative justice practitioners,* such as those we engaged with at Red Sea Road, to be able to co-design and implement those practical applications to engage restoratively with their constituents. Designing and facilitating a process such as those outlined below is a skill and a professional practice, and should not be entered into lightly, especially where harm has occurred, to ensure harm is not compounded by an untrained or less-than-thoughtful process.

For the uninitiated, Restorative Justice is, as Red Sea Road defines it, "about building, maintaining, and repairing relationships to form healthy, supportive and inclusive communities. When we do things that impact others and create harm in the community, it is our individual and collective responsibility to make things right. Restorative practices (RJ) help create spaces that hold us accountable in supportive and inclusive ways. Restorative Justice encourages outcomes that promote responsibility, reparation, and healing for all." Thus, core principles of such processes include a focus on the harms and consequent *needs* of those harmed first and foremost, but also on those of the community and of those

causing harm; addressing the **obligations** that result from those harms (the obligations of those who caused harm as well as those of the surrounding the events and/or situations); using inclusive, collaborative and **voluntary** processes (participants can remove themselves from a process at any time); the intention to repair the harm and **right the wrongs** to the extent possible.

Thus, the process by which an arts institution might engage a harmed constituent group or individual is structurally simple, and would consist of:

1. An expression of intent on the part of the institution, i.e., an acknowledgment of harm created, and the expression of intent to repair harm, followed by a restorative inquiry, where an RJ practitioner may then conduct 1:1 conversations with all parties to inform the process, to ascertain critical questions, and to support the parties' readiness for a process. Participants may ask questions to understand how RJ processes work, as well as share their story with the facilitator, who will gain a better understanding of the multiple perspectives and experiences that will be held in the RJ process. These conversations are confidential and are not shared by the facilitator at any time during the process. If a participant wants to share in the larger process from this conversation they can at their choice.

2. A dialogue process — once the above phase 1 is completed, and participants have shared and are willing to participate, sessions are planned and conducted, aiming to offer truth-telling, acknowledge and repair harm, and build together 'what is possible from here.' Often multiple sessions are needed, to maximize dialogue and achieve any degree of closure, and there should be an expectation by all involved to dedicate meaningful and significant time to the process. As Zadie Smith wrote, "time is how you spend your love."

RJ practitioners such as Red Sea Road were also quick to identify that in addition to utilizing a process such as the above when harm occurs, it is of equal or greater importance to identify ways to live restoratively on an ongoing basis, and these recommendations apply to individuals and institutions alike. As detailed by the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice, the core steps by which an individual or institution can live restoratively daily is to:

- Take relationships seriously and acknowledge your existence as one part of a greater whole,

- Be aware of the impact of your actions on others and the world around you,

- take responsibility for injuries you have caused by acknowledging and trying to repair harm,

- Listen to others deeply and compassionately, trying to understand, even when you don't agree,

- View conflicts in your life as opportunities,

For the uninitiated, Restorative Justice (RJ) is, as Red Sea Road defines it, "about building, maintaining, and repairing relationships to form healthy, supportive & inclusive communities."

- Involve people in decisions that affect them, wherever possible,

- Treat everyone with respect, including those who offend you,

- Engage in dialogue with others, even when that is difficult and remain open to learning from them,

- Be cautious about imposing your "truths" and views on other people and situations,

- Sensitively confront everyday injustices, such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, Islamophobia, and beyond.

All institutions would be well served by an unflinching self analysis of the structural mechanisms within their walls that allow for the above cultural manifestations of restorative justice to exist, and where they can be tangibly amplified. How are the above principles operationalized in organizational practices, policies and culture? How might they be magnified and then codified, so that the burden for advancing this work does not rest upon the shoulders of those that have been most harmed by institutional practices, but is made concrete by institutional policy? This is what it means for an arts institution to live restoratively.

Core principles of such processes include a focus on the harms and consequent needs of those harmed first and foremost, but also on those of the community and of those causing harm.
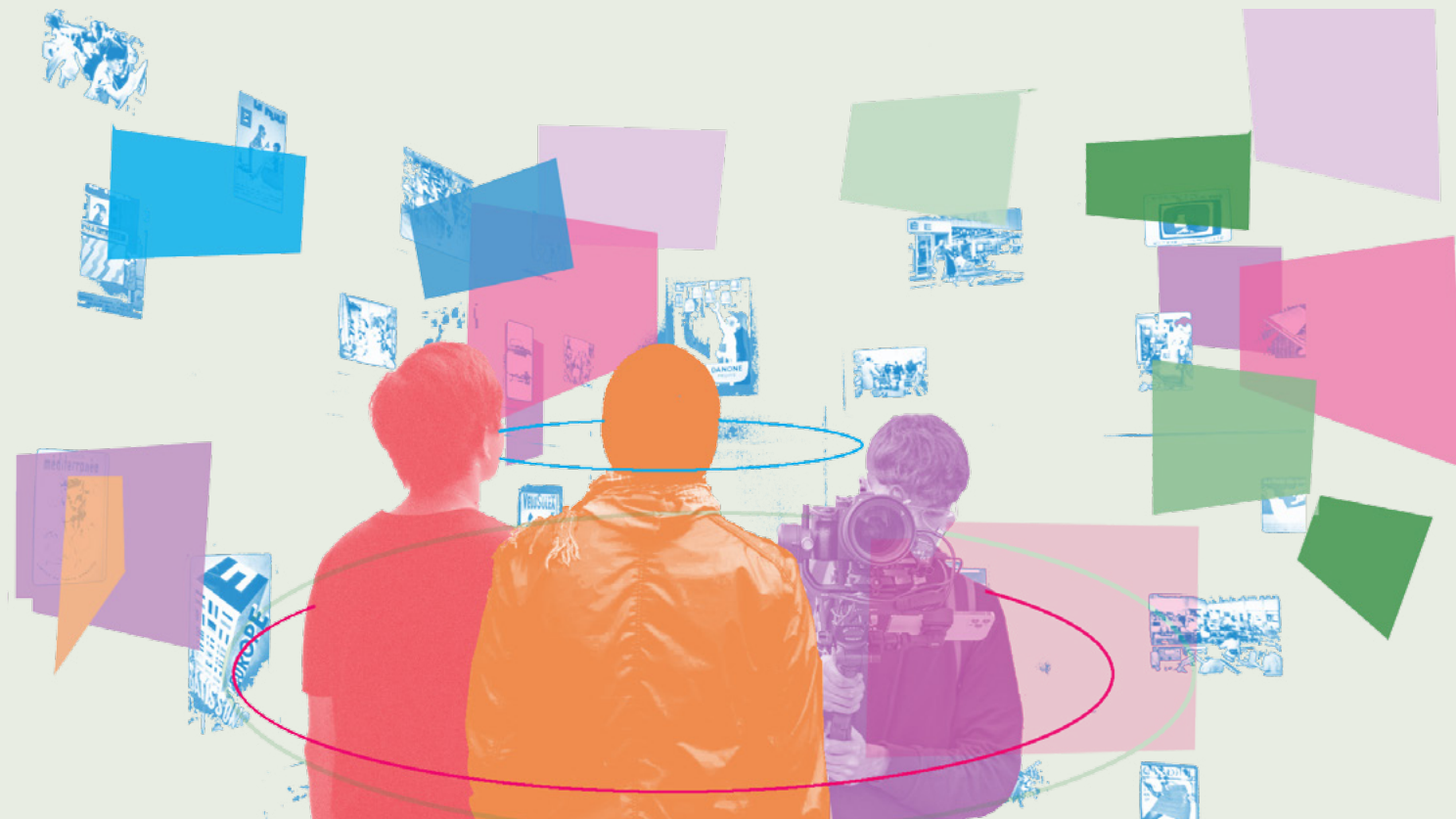
All institutions would be well served by an unflinching self analysis of the structural mechanisms within their walls that allow for the above cultural manifestations of restorative justice to exist, and where they can be tangibly amplified. How are the above principles operationalized in organizational practices, policies and culture?

As demonstrated above and throughout this report, all of the prototypes and provocations generated by Restoring the Future rely heavily on the expertise of our collaborators — in the case of this report, BIPOC programmers, BIPOC-led film festivals and experienced restorative justice practitioners. However as this section illuminates more than any, our prototypes ultimately rely on a deep desire to reinvent standard operating procedures and recenter the values of the media arts field in a kinder, more transparent place. This deep desire to reinvent and restore is perhaps the most important element — and also the most difficult — for any organization seeking to reject the long history of harmful capitalist practices that have persisted across even the nonprofit media arts field for so long. After all,

we are seldom trained by our peers and supervisors to act in contrast with the self-interest and self-preservation of the institution in lieu of the wellbeing of any external body, constituent or not. But it is precisely this recentering of the good of the commons over the needs of the individual or the institution that may hopefully, finally begin to heal the harm our institutions have for too long perpetrated toward countless historically marginalized groups

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND HOW TO DISRUPT THEM

Our discussion now begins to conceptually illuminate the variety of institutional priorities, policies and non-profit modi operandi in particular at play that can either uplift or inhibit that platform's commitment to curatorial justice. We will more practically explore these specific dynamics further in this section, as detailed by the participating organizations.

Many participants detailed a clear and cohesive curatorial justice perspective codified and implemented by their programming teams, referencing considerations

such as privileging underrepresented voices, shining a light on issues that need and deserve amplification, engaging external allies from invested communities, and much more. However these same organizations also articulated especially clearly the financial realities that complicate the implementation of these practices. In particular, some spoke to the necessity of corporate sponsorships to keep their organizations solvent, which can often come with programmatic strings attached. Others detailed resistance to codifying any equity-based programming values at all (e.g., resistance to explicit references of "decentering whiteness" in curation) at the senior leadership and board of directors level in particular, and certainly a resistance to publicizing these values in any way.

Indeed these schisms in values between programming teams and senior leaders or board members were a recurring theme in our conversations with programmers working or having worked within predominantly (or historically) white institutions (PWIs). Several of those we spoke with detailed the manner in which board members exerted strong opinions on the "kind of films" that programming teams needed to prioritize, which was sometimes very much at odds with the curatorial vision of the staff. Many of these conflicts and tensions seemed to manifest from a discrepancy between each party's definition of the festival's core constituents, and the perception from board and senior leaders that representing marginalized communities amounts

to a dilution of "quality" in favor of reaching quotas. Indeed, this weaponized dichotomy between "representation" and "quality" was often referenced as a common tactic among senior leaders within legacy institutions that had held their positions for long periods of time. There seemed to be a generally shared perspective from these senior leaders within PWIs that serving a financial bottom line and serving a community bottom line were directly at odds. Naturally, many BIPOC programmers within PWIs that we spoke with disagree, and many BIPOC-led festivals have clearly demonstrated that this is a false dichotomy. Though several BIPOC-led film festivals will also attest that they have at times accepted less formally challenging films into the program (which they felt was a compromise of artistic values), because they knew the film would sell tickets in large numbers. So regardless of the pressure or lack thereof from senior leaders and board, the financial pressures of sustaining a film festival, and the way those pressures ripple through to programming decisions is an undeniable reality in all sectors.

Another institutional barrier to curatorial justice verbalized consistently and loudly by our interviewees throughout our research process was the very manner of employment of festival programmers, i.e., the fact that the vast majority of festival programmers are contract workers, and not full time year round staff with benefits. Thus, most programmers must split up their year across multiple festivals in order to make ends meet, and

as a result, there is no downtime for the individual programmer to reflect. Nor is there intentional space held for the curatorial institution to step back and examine its practices in regards to curatorial justice and community responsibility with its entire programmatic staff. This makes a comprehensive and thoughtful advancement and evolution of curatorial practices nearly impossible. At best, if this work is undertaken in some manner, it is siloed among only those more senior Festival staff that are employed year round, which limits the collective wisdom at the table. Indeed, many BIPOC seasonal programmers we spoke with expressed a vehement need and great passion to delve deeply into the codification of artistic and ethical programming values, but that without being resourced to do that work, they are unable to do so.

All of these institutional pressures in the end, seemed to boil down to money. As veteran programmer Lucy Mukerjee stated simply and eloquently: "The barrier to justice is money," and our findings indicate this could not be more true. Consider that these film festivals contribute an immense amount of value to the film industry at large by feeding the commercial distribution pipeline to a large degree. Additionally, festivals can (when programmed thoughtfully and intentionally, as our participants do) contribute great value to their constituent communities through better representation, community healing and corrective narrative change. In other words, they are dismantling tropes and stereotypes, which has immense

impact on many sectors of daily life and in many ways facilitates the advancement of democratic values and the realization of a truly pluralist society. Because again, whether it is the intention of an artistic organization or not, its curation informs culture which informs society — for better or worse.

And yet, these vital cultural institutions and their staff are critically under-resourced in a manner that is deeply unsustainable and needs radical reinvention. Thus, the pursuit of curatorial justice is no longer merely a programmatic responsibility, or an operational one, or even an institutional one — but a systemic one. We then need to also examine the systemic impediments to justice in curation and prototype new models that are not just sustainable, but regenerative to those leaders that are doing the necessary work of realizing our collective vision for a pluralistic culture. In many ways, our entire cultural democracy is thus at stake.

Put simply, philanthropy and corporate sponsors are not valuing and resourcing curatorial platforms in an equitable manner. Despite the millions of dollars flowing into this sector, it is barely enough to birth a festival into being, and does so under circumstances that many festival leaders were quick to call out as "traumatic." Thankfully, many film industry practices are increasingly undergoing examinations of how care — or lack thereof — is baked into various industry business models, and some are being reinvented accordingly, albeit slowly. Film festival financial models are no exception, especially those that

are younger, more BIPOC-rooted, and have clear artistic and community values. Aymar Jean Christian again: "Philanthropy needs to more robustly fund organizations that are connected to grass roots, and shift funding away from prestige organizations that are more exclusionary and discriminatory."

One programmer at a legacy European film institution shared an interesting example of their funding model that pointed to an opportunity for wider systemic disruption. Specifically, they were able to apply a more codified DEI framework to curation and operations within their organization by applying for EU funding, which as a prerequisite requires the organization to adopt equity practices in several areas. By seeking out these much-needed operational funds, and advocating for the prerequisite enhancements to the institution's policies and practices, this programming executive was able to cement a DEI framework where it had not previously existed. This example was illuminating, in that it clarified the manner in which funders — at the federal, state, philanthropic and corporate level — can apply pressure to more resistant organizations to codify and operationalize these commitments. AXS Lab's Jason Dasilva took this notion one step further: "There need to be grants made available to organizations to develop and advance and improve their curatorial processes." Many participants echoed this statement. By far, when asked what the field could offer organizations to advance their curatorial justice work, the
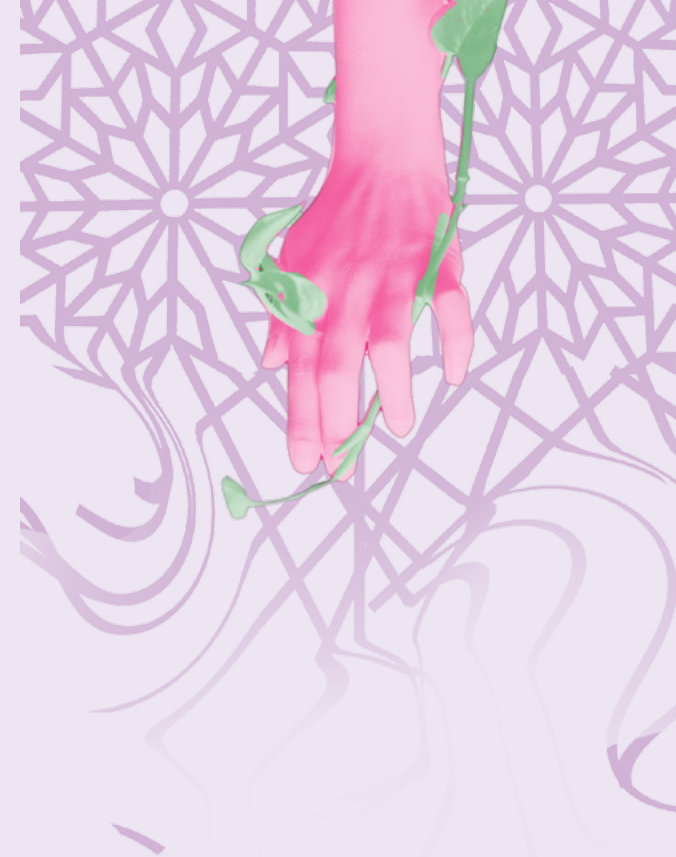
> *"Philanthropy needs to more robustly fund organizations that are connected to grass roots, and shift funding away from prestige organizations that are more exclusionary and discriminatory."*
> — **Aymar Jean Christian**

first and most critical ask was funding: funding to make festivals more accessible, to expand programming to include more communities, to expand staff and more fairly compensate them, pay for additional venues, etc. Dasilva again: "We all agree this work is important, and we all know that no one is funding that work, so it's not going to get done. That needs to change."

WIF's Maikiko James spoke to the particular challenges of advocating for this expansion of investment from the corporate sector, i.e., studios and networks. "There is a crisis of values field-wide. I truly wish our corporate constituents would listen to our work and not make decisions such as, for example, gutting their POC content incubators and catering to the "middle of the country." We know what that is code for. If we want a systemic shift, we have to get real about how we are seeing the future. How do we get real about what is happening, who gets to make what, and what is platformed for exhibition? Our corporate constituents need to take the responsibility to transform into an industry where we can all thrive. Otherwise, we won't even survive."

Eugene Sun Park of Full Spectrum Features agrees, adding: "the field needs to provide more funding for the things that are not as flashy, like general operating grants, administrative support, programmers and festival operations staff. These can't be seasonal jobs. Funders need to move away from funding what is press release worthy. Do something radical, increase your operating

grants by, let's say 300%. Until you do, you're just keeping the poor poor and the rich rich by pegging funds to the previous year's operating budget. Funders are supposed to give more support to the organizations that don't have enough resources. Do more root cause analyses and put money toward what has more impact, and not just what is press release worthy." Indeed, Full Spectrum is in the process of shifting the structure of their programs to bring supported filmmakers into the organization as staff, so those artists can be paid more equitably, and with benefits. This work is based on a deep research process they are undertaking around Universal Basic Income across a variety of sectors, and its applications and viability within the film industry.

Lela Meadow-Conner, co-founder of mamafilm and former Executive Director of Film Festival Alliance adds to the list of underfunded and direly needed initiatives: namely, training. "Festivals are not often created with in-house expertise in financial operations and human resources, to support strategic planning, understanding how your organizational mission can — and probably *should* — change over time. Or how to train your executive leadership, and your board of directors to navigate that necessary change. Many recent examples of organizational implosion are directly related to their boards of directors. Since the majority of film festival and independent cinemas operate as nonprofits, we need to put extra care and attention towards board training — from checking egos at the door, to truly comprehend-

ing best practices for their stakeholders (with the understanding that these are constantly shifting), and offering them a more global view of the significance of curation both within their communities and the greater cinematic landscape. In the best case scenario, a board of directors exists to nurture, and trust in their staff, with a deep appreciation for fiscal sustainability that can be easily conveyed to funders."

Māoriland's Madeleine Hakaraia de Young adds that funders need to offer "more money and resources and then just get out of the way. We need funding to allow programmers to be fairly remunerated and screening fees for all the participating artists. We need support for filmmakers to participate in festivals fully. We need to build a community of programmers that is sharing institutional knowledge in a circular way." Her final point is significant. Many others referenced that knowledge sharing is the basis for systemic transformation, and that several organizations are experimenting with ways of working differently in curation, but no one is paying attention to how they are doing it, and that needs to change. Thus, the examination presented in this report in and of itself was cited as a necessary systemic disruption. Femme Frontera's Co-Founder, Angie Reza Tures: "We've been operating in the dark. We've been trying things and seeing what sticks, and I'm tired of that. This community at the border has been dealing with a lot of struggle since 2016. Knowledge sharing reduces harm and many of us need help."

These comments are echoed by CAAM's Don Young: "There is a constructed firewall around the way we work that has created inequity and proven to be very unhealthy for the industry." Indeed, as noted earlier, some of those organizations that are already demonstrating field-leading practices in equitable programming are doing so with opposition from either their senior leaders or their boards of directors, or their funders, thus adding to the unsustainability of their work. How can we as a field uplift these values and practices on a national and international level and amplify their sustainability and growth potential?

This report is just one step forward. Fieldwide transformation is a long and arduous process. What incremental progress has been made over the decades in the film industry as a whole has been the result of consistent advocacy and organizing efforts. The 2023 WGA/SAG-AFTRA strikes are a prime example of the need for culture workers to firmly demand new infrastructure to protect their needs and basic human dignity in response to ever-evolving strategies within large corporations to continue to maximize shareholder value at their expense. These organizing efforts are the result of energy that needs consistent catalyzation and re-catalyzation. Otherwise entropy sets in, organizational commitments lapse, progress begins to slip and backslide into the aforementioned modi operandi. This curatorial justice movement also needs its steward, its WGA/SAG-AFTRA, and while many individual organizations are advancing their own festivals' commit-

These organizing efforts are the result of energy that needs consistent catalyzation and re-catalyzation. Otherwise entropy sets in, organizational commitments lapse, progress begins to slip and backslide into the aforementioned modi operandi. This curatorial justice movement also needs its steward.
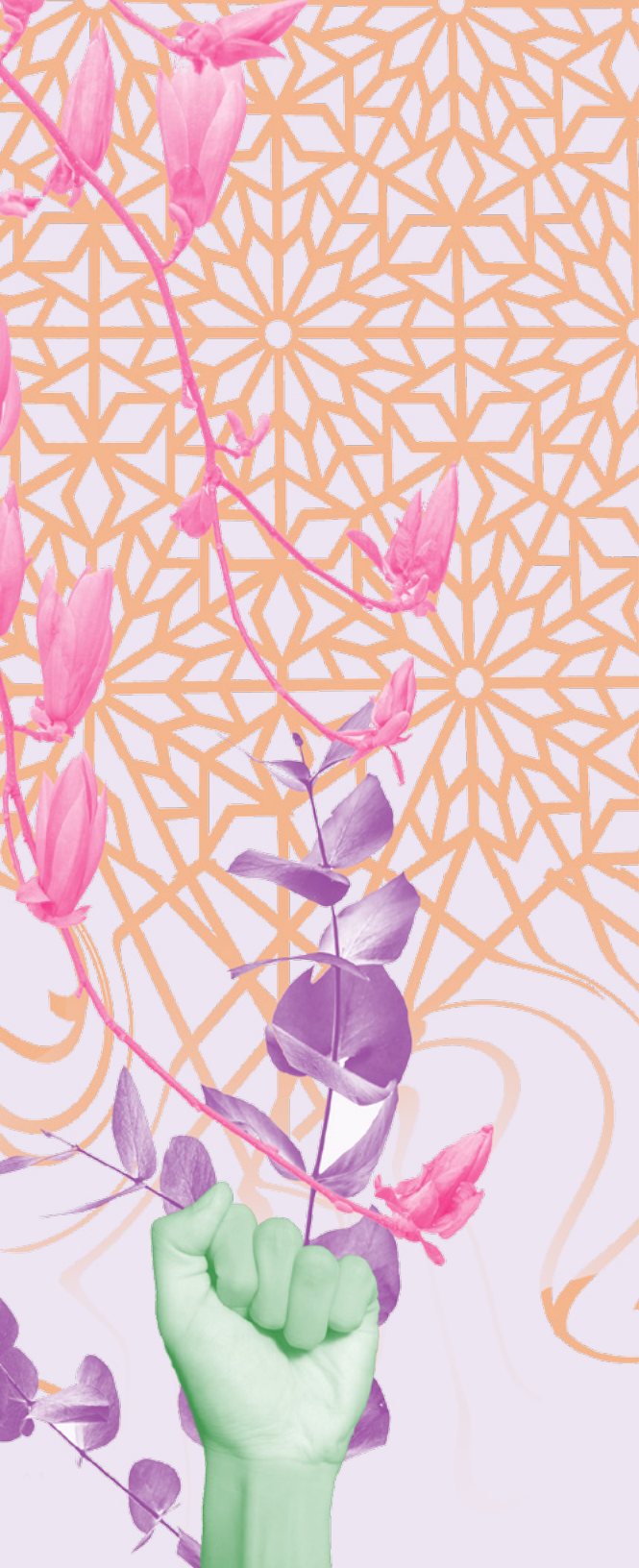
ments to and evolution of this work within their walls, we suggest that none have the capacity to play the critical role of field connector, educator, and organizer among the international community of film curators, with perhaps one sole exception: The Programmers of Colour Collective.

Founded in 2018, and comprising programmers who identify as "people of color, women and TSLGBTQ+, the objective of Programmers of Colour Collective (POC2) is to advocate for a more inclusive programming pool worldwide." Spurred by the many cases of bias in film festival selections that are gender-imbalanced, lack representation of Black, Indigenous and people of color, or else portray them or other underrepresented groups in a way that is inauthentic, extractive or culturally appropriative, this group of festival and industry programmers decided to take a magnifying glass to the international programming pool. The collective's primary aim is not only to stimulate a conversation around the lack of programmers who are BIPOC at international film festivals, but also to be a catalyst for transformative change towards a more just and community-rooted field, and to make festival programs themselves more robust, and reflective of international audiences. In our discussions with POC2 Co-Founders Mukerjee and Bhebhe (who co-founded the collective with Hussain Currimbhoy and Paul Struthers), and engaging in knowledge sharing and facilitating worldbuilding sessions with POC2 membership, it has become abundantly clear to us that this collective serves a unique and vital purpose in connecting intersectional programmers of color with each other to build community, sharing resources, knowledge and job opportunities, advocating for the sustainability and equitable valuation of the field of programmers at large, and fostering healing of the harm caused by toxic curatorial environments across the industry. The leaders and members of this collective appear to have created a trust-based, thriving community, and appear to be uniquely and powerfully suited to expand its institutional profile and slate of programs to function as the vital educational and advocacy leader to organize this movement forward and engage in collective bargaining with parent companies, corporate sponsors and philanthropy to advance their work and value it appropriately and sustainably — *provided that they too are resourced to lead this work*.

The centrality of this collective and its evolution to expand its support for the movement of curatorial justice is an integral part of the vision collectively manifest from several POC2 members and allies via the three worldbuilding sessions we conducted over a year between 2022 and 2023, the results of which are outlined in the following session.

THE FUTURE OF CURATION
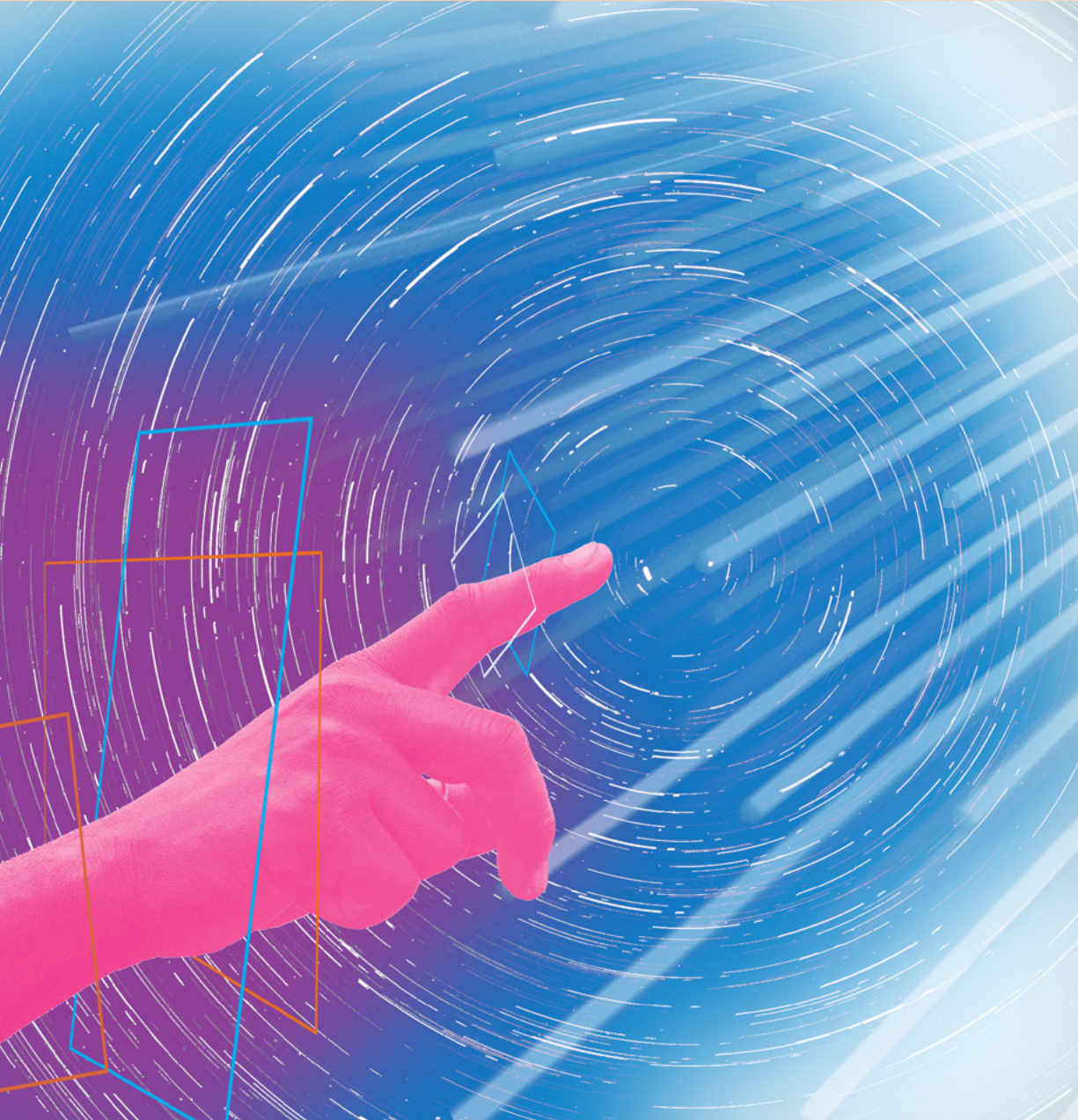
As is apparent from the above, the process by which we gathered and analyzed dozens of hours of conversations with our programming participants and then synthesized them here in this report was exhaustive. There is a great deal more nuance and critical detail in the experiences of every one of our interview participants that is impossible to render fully in a document such as this.

However, our task was nevertheless to seek to synthesize this data in a clear and digestible manner, and distill a foundational set of useful practices, values, and calls to action (to be expanded, iterated and evolved over time) from the perspectives of those closest to this work, in order to move perpetually closer to a field more rooted in curatorial justice over time.

And to envision that field, it has always been the working practice of Restoring the Future in all of its industry organizing work to engage in a process of worldbuilding — of future architecture — so that we may begin to envision that next summit in the pursuit of justice right now. In our worldbuilding practice, a group of participants collectively identify the values they seek to center in a radically aspirational future for their sector of the field (in this case, film curation), identify what structures or practices would be the most just and beautiful manifestations of those values in the future, and then begin to identify the first steps or prototypes toward bringing that world into the present, which will comprise the beginnings of our roadmap.

So, in addition to conducting interviews with participants on the state of the field at present, Restoring the Future also facilitated three discreet worldbuilding sessions from 2022 to 2023: 1) a closed door virtual session at Getting Real 2022 with POC2 members, 2) a virtual public session at the January 2023 Beyond Resilience event hosted by Firelight Media, and 3) an in-person public session at the 2023 Berlinale & European Film Market. The participants of these worldbuilding sessions include many of those cited at the top of this report.

In all our work, Restoring the Future seeks first to distill the core values that all our participants seek to center in our radically aspirational future — in this case, the future of curation. Among those identified were *self-determination*: that communities will hold the right to narrative self determination, or again, as originated by the disability justice movement: "nothing about us without us." Additional core tenets included: *programming joy over trauma* in order to create joyful experiences for communities; the notion of a field that is able to *move together and through*, i.e., to acknowledge that both filmmaking and programming are isolating, and that we must move into alignment with those around us, and create space for them to hold us accountable; *centering communities and their engagement* around films as much as the films themselves; de-centering individual curatorial power and *flattening hierarchies* in service of community power building; *maximizing access and accessibility* in all art exhibition spaces, both in service of disability justice and also in support of accessibility of language, geography, class, and beyond; *curating authentically and restoratively* in service of community and forcing industry will meet us where we are as opposed to programming in service of what industry seems to want; and *centering care* in every manifestation of the work, i.e., care for programmers and festival workers, care for filmmakers, and care for audiences.

Our participants then designed the following new structures of the field of the future that would manifest from their stated core values. In this future, the capitalist foundation will be removed entirely from the business of curation and new and regenerative sources of funding will be created that also maximize cultural and public good. This would manifest as a strong, centralized and organized community of values-aligned collaborators at the center of the field of curation that is able to exercise collective power for just purpose. This community would engage in ongoing analyses of the group dynamics of curation and deepen its awareness of all the things we previously took for granted, and move toward a truly consensus-based power-sharing process. New curatorial and economic models would exist that bypass systems of exclusion and scarcity altogether, and reject the incremental strategies characteristic of the toxic capitalist white supremacist institutions of the past. Festivals and all exhibition spaces would instead be rooted in the needs of the local community — restorative, two-way, regenerative and ongoing year round relationships with a wide range of audiences and the fieldwide recognition that all of these audiences have great value, regardless of their size.

This is what a "long-term reinvention" strategy looks like to our participants, according to our definition of curatorial justice, referenced early in this report, i.e., what our participants would build with unlimited resources and unlimited time, through a radically aspirational lens. While this may seem far-fetched when considering the current state of the film festival industry today, it has always been the practice of Restoring the Future to reject incrementalism and the notion of settling for the change that seems possible — or even equitable — in the here and now. For when
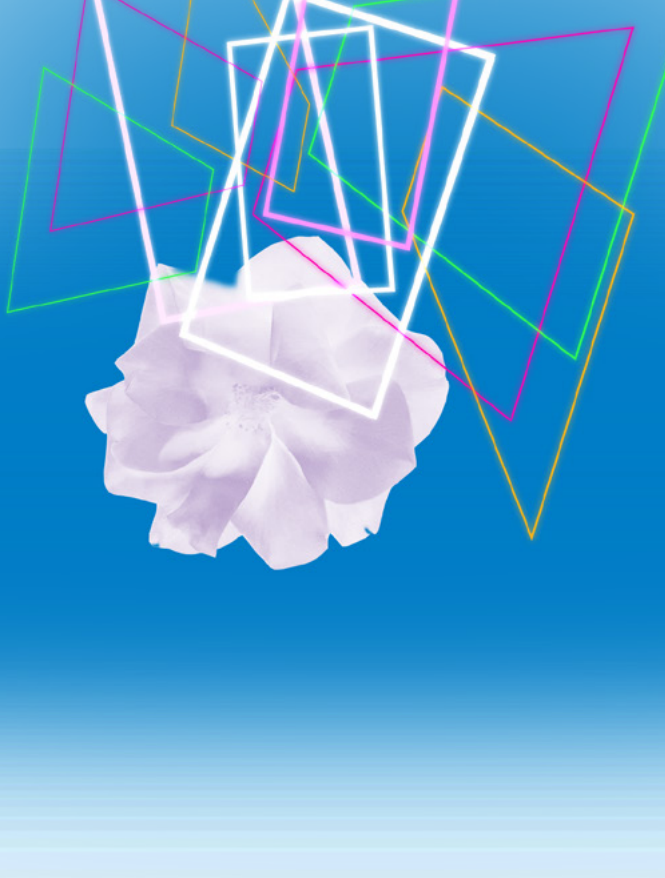
we build toward equity, we work merely toward the conditions of base survival. Those communities that have been most harmed by irresponsible and harmful curation deserve better, which is why when we worldbuild, we begin with a vision for the future where those of us most at the margins have all the conditions necessary to thrive. But again, this is the long view.

In service of this long view, we must begin by building prototypes for that future, the first steps in our roadmap toward it. This might manifest as some of the aforementioned "short term reform" strategies that comprise our definition of curatorial justice, i.e., to triage the ongoing harm caused by irresponsible curation at present. Those first steps, those prototypes, are the nine provocations previously detailed in our report's introduction:

- **Curatorial Values:** Cultural institutions must develop and make publicly available their organizational artistic values and commitments to responsible curation, which will transcend the personal priorities of their staff and inform selection processes and accountability measures.

- **Data Analysis:** Curatorial organizations must intentionally gather and analyze the demographics of their submitting filmmakers, their programming staff, and their audience constituents in an effort to maximize stories from and curation by their priority (e.g., global majority)

communities, and thus curate to accurately reflect society or a visionary society of the future.

- **Team Expansion:** Programming teams must work to maximize the cultural expansiveness of their collective makeup and knowledge base, and the plurality of perspectives vetting any given film, while also acknowledging this effort is inevitably insufficient to ensure authenticity, because of the complexity of intersectionality and lived experience.

- **Harm Reduction Protocols:** In the event that problematic films fall through the gaps, despite diverse programming teams and/or a commitment to curatorial justice practices, organizations need a clear protocol on how to manage such cases, prioritizing the reduction or elimination of harm caused to the communities depicted in these films, which may include removing the films from a selection, public ownership of the oversight, etc.

- **Power-sharing:** Curation requires humility. Thus, in an effort to advance a community-centered approach to programming, curators shall meaningfully engage all programming team members, programming fellows, community members, external culture bearers, subject matter experts, and ethical reviewers as often as possible in order to vet films as responsibly as possible.

These provocations, these prototypes, like the practices of our participants, are a work-in-progress, a process and not a destination.

- **Operational Praxis:** Curation of a film festival or any other exhibition venture exists within an ecosystem of operations, institutional policies and culture that can either uplift those values even further impede them. Thus, institutional senior leaders and boards of directors must better protect and support festival programmers and operations staff to drive and operate from artistic and community-centered values.

- **Structural Sustainability:** Philanthropy and corporate sponsors must resource festivals to advance the festival's values and practices, and new economic models must be developed to make film festival labor more sustainable. This work is often extractive and traumatic, and needs to be resourced to center care and community engagement, if curatorial institutions are to sustainably contribute to a *pluralist cultural democracy*. While this has not historically been the stated goal of many curatorial organizations, this report argues that moving forward, it must become one, due to the real world impact of curation in all its forms.

- **Restorative Justice:** The media industry's inability to acknowledge inadvertently harmful curatorial choices stifles discourse, creates barriers to industry progress, and prevents community healing. Thus, programmers, their institutional leaders, and our entire media arts system must cultivate a culture of — and frameworks for — accountability, community engagement, harm reduction, and restor-

ative justice. A framework for a restorative justice process between such media arts organizations and communities they serve is included in this document as an overview and point-of-departure for how this kind of process can work.

- **Resource Programming Disruptors:** Long term fieldwide curatorial change requires sustained knowledge sharing across all arts organizations, and a well-funded industry organizing effort led by a uniquely-suited body, such as the Programmers of Colour Collective.

These provocations, these prototypes, like the practices of our participants, are a work-in-progress, a process and not a destination. All our participants agree that there is much more work to be done to advance a commitment to the curation of culture that is maximally responsible to communities depicted within culture. Hence, our explicit intention is to propose this as a foundational set of practices that are intended for iteration and evolution over time by the participating organizations cited herein, and all others that seek to join such an effort.

As is hopefully apparent from this worldbuilding synthesis, culture workers across various sectors, at a variety of levels, engaged in a myriad of curatorial forms and processes all have great agency in beginning to build and work toward the just and beautiful future of curation that all culture workers and communities need and deserve. The purpose of Restoring the Future's worldbuilding practice is just that — to use our process of future architecture to begin to reveal the immense possibilities already available to us in the present. Let's begin.

CONCLUSION
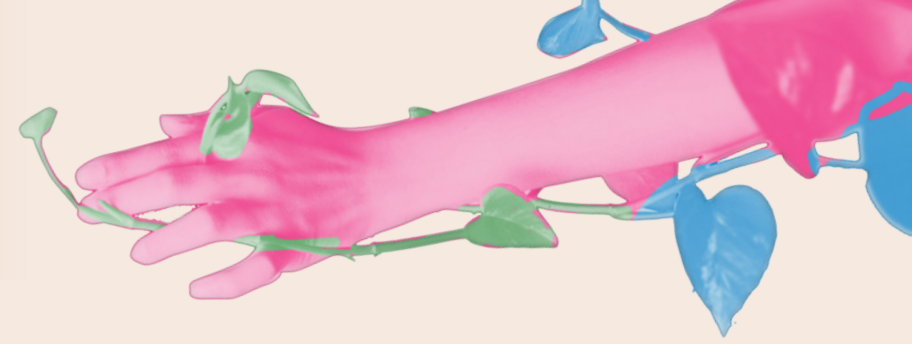
As outlined throughout this report — and as should be obvious to anyone living in the world in this, the year 2024, *the stakes of cultural production, and thus, community-centered curation, are very high.*

Curation defines culture and culture has an undeniable impact on society. We live in a world where dominant cultures regularly proliferate false narratives about historically marginalized communities. These narratives generate wealth and inform public policy and thus daily life, which perpetuates a cycle of marginalization and violence against these same communities. Culture workers that seek to call attention to this kind of injustice are regularly misrepresented, gaslit, and blacklisted. It is thus the undeniable responsibility of any curatorial body to define its values in relation to the culture they are trying to promote via upholding or upending the status quo, and then curate rigorously and ethically in accordance with those values. In doing so, they must be willing to take on the humility to decenter their own egos and personal power in support of the collective good of all people.

Equally important to acknowledge is the clear and obvious fact that this work is not the responsibility of the programmer alone. Curation does not exist in a vacuum, but within the institutional politics and systemic unsustainability that so many sectors of our field have been struggling against for decades. Thus, all other culture workers in curation-adjacent spaces must in turn support and uplift curators to do this work. The responsibility of just and responsible cultural production and dissemination is shared across those programmers curating culture, the institutions and their leaders employing and caring for those programmers. It is shared by the philanthropic and corporate sponsors resourcing these institutions, and the like-minded distribution executives pulling from these independent eco-systems for stories to platform on a wider scale. These larger forces have the responsibility and the readily available resources to choose to function according to a double bottom line — to maximize shareholder value, as they always have, but also to maximize the wellbeing of those under-resourced and unprotected individuals and organizations upon whom they depend in order to thrive. These programmers and their employers must thrive also, if the independent sector of our industry is to survive at all. And if one thing has been made clear through the exploration of this report, it is that independent curators existing outside of corporate values systems *must* survive and thrive in order for the most vital narratives of our time to connect with the audiences and communities that need to experience them. Again, cultural production — and cultural proliferation — are matters of survival.

We can build the radically aspirational world we all need and deserve, but first, we have to see it, on as many screens as possible. And in order to see this future onscreen, it too must first be programmed — responsibly, ethically, sustainably, and with as much care as humanly possible.

As in the original report co-created by Restoring the Future, the acts of collective imagining represented within this document are matters of choice, and ultimately, that choice is what this project asks of you. The choice to bring your deepest human values into practice for the collective good of us all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS