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The Gallery Art Hive as a Metaphor for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives

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Abstract

This article explores how a visual metaphor offered inspiration for and was influenced by equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts being implemented in an established art education center. The art hive within this center's contemporary art gallery is examined as a metaphor for the organization's EDI work. Each month, the art hive transformed the gallery into an inclusive environment for diverse participants, established a sharing culture, and emphasized process and action. These characteristics aligned with the methods the organization was employing to create institutional shifts in relation to EDI. The author, who was the Director of this art

education center, began to use the art hive as a metaphor for the organization's vision for EDI work to help community members see possible futures, understand the work ahead, and further spark motivation for this journey. The correlations between the gallery's art hive and the organization's EDI efforts are examined.

Towards Transformation

Particularly starting in the 1960s, museums and other art institutions have been called upon to alter exclusory practices that privilege elite white perspectives and audiences. Amidst the protests enacted throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, museums were critiqued as lacking social relevancy (Mayer, 2005). With these calls, museums often turned to museum educators to establish stronger and more inclusive relationships with publics. The American Alliance of Museum's 1991 report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, called for education to take a central role in museum institutions. While, in the past, museum educators had been traditionally pushed to the sidelines of these organizations, with these calls, their positions began to take more centralized roles (Munley & Roberts, 2006; Reid, 2013, 2014). Yet, when funding challenges arise, education departments often suffer the most (Krantz & Downey, 2021). Further adding to the complexity of these circumstances was the fact that there had also been a lack of cross-institutional critical reflection related to positionality, privilege, power, and what social justice truly meant in these institutions (Ng, et al., 2017). Within this situation, real change has been slow.

In the current social, political, and cultural climate, there are increasing calls for art institutions to examine, disrupt, and ultimately radically transform their practices that support discrimination, colonialism, and other forms of oppression (Cuyler, 2020; Ng, et al., 2017, Taylor, 2017). Some who have felt uncomfortable with this difficult knowledge and associated conversations have finally felt ready to engage in the discomfort. Rather than simply observing and noting the issues within these organizations, an increasing number of museum and gallery professionals and researchers have been engaging in deep, difficult self-reflections and working towards concrete actions. Often, the desire to see real change happen quickly is strong. For some institutions, this might seem like an impossible task, especially if practices have been engrained in an institution for decades. As oppressive practices and thinking are systemic, major ongoing efforts are necessary for change to occur.

The primary question that this article addresses is: How can a visual metaphor offer inspiration for and promote equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts in an established art education institution? This article explores how one art education organization, the Visual

Arts Centre (the Centre or VAC), recently critically examined its practices, histories, and policies in relation to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The Centre's contemporary art gallery, the McClure Gallery, will be the focus of this story, with the McClure Gallery's art hive being explored as a metaphor for the VAC's EDI initiatives. Finally, I will examine what the use of a metaphor offered in this journey.

Reflecting on 75 Years

The Visual Arts Centre is a non-profit art institution, with an art school, contemporary art gallery, and community outreach program. Located in what is commonly referred to as Montreal (known as Tiohti:áke in Kanien'kéha and Mooniyang in Anishinaabemowin), the Centre is situated in a lively artistic and culturally diverse community. Between 2017 and 2021, I occupied the Director position at the Visual Arts Centre. During this time, we carefully explored, reflected on, and celebrated the Centre's more than seven-decade history. This included the publication of a book about the history of the VAC, researched and written by Victoria LeBlanc, who was the Director of the Visual Arts Centre from 1996 until 2017. Her research process included extensive interviews and review of documents such as newspaper clippings, historical photographs, and archives, including those of the VAC, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and the Canadian Guild of Crafts (LeBlanc, 2021). Having access to this history as we made efforts to expand and deepen the Centre's EDI work was crucial, as looking at individual and institutional histories can be considered essential to authentically shaping future identities and realities (Bolin, 2020). At the same time, we acknowledged that, to be effective, EDI efforts needed to be ongoing and involve critical self-reflection – areas for improvement would need to be recognized and a commitment to doing better would be required (Rolling, 2020).

Beginning as a women-run ceramics collective called the Potters' Club in 1946, the Centre was born outside of the mainstream art world culture that was dominated by white cis-gendered male artists. Over the years, the Potters' Club grew, adding fine and applied arts courses to their workings, leading to the decision to change the name of the organization to the Visual Arts Centre in 1971. As a fully bilingual (English and French) arts organization, the VAC was and continues to be a place where English and French speakers, as well as individuals who speak other languages, connect through art. In referring to the cross-cultural and multilingual interactions through and with art during the time of the Potters' Club, Virginia McClure, who held many essential roles at the VAC, including founding member, teacher, director, president, and benefactor, expressed, "We joked that we didn't speak English or French. We spoke clay" (LeBlanc, 2021, p. 43). Continuing with efforts to establish cross-cultural understandings and engagement, in 1996, the VAC's community outreach program was established. The program engages diverse typically marginalized populations in free art educational programming.

When I started as the Director of the VAC, I learned about these and other important previous inclusion and diversity efforts at the Centre, which became sources of inspiration and starting points for the future directions of our EDI work. Throughout my time at the Centre, I was interested in learning about this community's understandings of and opinions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the VAC and how I could meaningfully support and rally the community in this journey.

Engaging in Research and Practice

To engage in this learning process, I began to look at my practice at the VAC through a research lens, inspired by practice-based research. With practice-based research, research and practice are conducted as separate but complementary processes that aim to produce new knowledge and inform future practice (Candy et al., 2022). This approach is focused on, emerges from, and is driven by practice (Pringle, 2020). To ground the research in practice, the practitioner researcher is centrally situated in the research (Candy et al., 2022; Sade, 2022). Importantly, creative products are typically essential elements of this research (Candy & Edmonds, 2011). The methods employed are often creative in nature, falling outside of approaches found in the sciences and social sciences (Sade, 2022). Sade (2022) argues that creative practitioners are being called upon to engage in pressing problems they are facing in contemporary society and to do so through engaging in practice-based research. Pringle (2020) believes that this form of research can be particularly beneficial to art museums as they work to address oppressive structures and dynamics. With this, practice-based research can create opportunities to engage with and identify alternative approaches for responding to key issues in an organization and wider society (Sade, 2022). This research approach aligned with my intentions at the VAC and enabled me to engage in research while conducting my work in the position I occupied.

The methods employed in this research included regular informal conversations with VAC employees, members of the Board of Directors, students, and gallery visitors; observational notes taken during and after art hive programs; photo documentation of art hive events; and analysis of existing policies, minutes from meetings that addressed EDI concerns, committee reports, and art hive programming reports. The creative artefact that resided at the center of this investigation was the McClure Gallery Art Hive program, which I viewed as an artistic intervention in a contemporary art gallery space.

The Gallery Art Hive as EDI Metaphor

Drawing on my interest in art hives and the work of Janis Timm-Bottos (2006, 2016), in 2019 the McClure Gallery Coordinator, Thi-My Truong, and I, along with the help of several of the Centre's employees, initiated a monthly pop-up style art hive directly in the McClure Gallery.

These occurred from 10am until 4pm on the last Saturday of each exhibition. Ultimately, we developed the McClure Gallery Art Hive (MGAH) to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the McClure Gallery. An art hive is a welcoming arts-based, free-access, non-evaluative community space that encourages self-directed and group creative learning (Lewis et al., 2021; Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015). Within these community art studios, everyone is welcome and is recognized as an artist. A variety of materials are provided, and participants are encouraged to experiment and exchange their knowledge and skills.

Although these are new spaces for many, they tend to be familiar, reminding people of the whimsical and exploratory ways that children play and learn or the joy of gathering around a dinner table with family and friends. In their research, Lewis, Macleod, and Li (2021) found art hives to provide spaces for social connections, where their participants experienced “home-like support” (p. 35). With this sense of belonging and support, these sites promote arts-based social inclusion for and with diverse populations (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015). As such, I saw the potential for art hives to break down traditional, deep-seated barriers between contemporary art galleries and their publics.

The McClure Gallery has a dedicated following, composed of the City of Montreal’s artistic milieu, local residents, and a number of the VAC’s students. By setting up an art hive in the gallery, I aimed for this institution to become more permeable within the community, deepening relationships with these publics, reaching new publics, encouraging people to stay longer in the space, and empowering individuals to experiment in a creative environment aimed at promoting both connectivity and independence. To boldly situate the gallery as an inclusive public place for experimentation, engagement, and relationship development, I positioned our art hive directly in the exhibition space, amongst contemporary artworks. Marking the end of each exhibition, the McClure Gallery Art Hive transformed the exhibition space into an inclusive playground for engagement.

As the program unfolded, I saw the art hive as offering a potential metaphor for the direction of EDI initiatives at the Centre. A new director in an established organization, I needed to gain the community’s trust as we further developed the EDI work at the Centre. I saw the potential for the use of a metaphor in this process – that is, employing a concept, idea, or activity as a symbol for the future directions of EDI work at the VAC. I was inspired by Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel (2011), who described how using a metaphor to frame proposed shifts can be helpful in efforts to develop understandings and legitimacy around potential change. Supporting change efforts, metaphors can help people rethink assumptions and beliefs and spark new associations. Miwon Choe (2010) highlighted that metaphor offers a vehicle for critical reflection and cultural negotiation. Through this, metaphor can stimulate

empathic understanding, which can be helpful when beginning to envision new approaches to EDI work (Ng, et al., 2017).

In reviewing my observation notes recorded during art hives, the McClure Gallery Coordinator's art hive reports, ongoing conversations with the Gallery Coordinator, and photos that captured the art hives, I pinpointed some primary characteristics of the McClure Gallery Art Hive. As I analyzed the EDI committee meeting minutes, EDI policies, EDI reports, and other related documents, I began to see a correlation between the primary characteristics of the MGAH and the methods we were employing to create shifts in the organization in relation to EDI efforts. In what follows, I will review some of these correlations.

A Welcoming Place for Diverse Participants

A desire to make the VAC an even more welcoming, equitable, and inclusive space for diverse publics, partners, and employees was central to the initial EDI efforts that we engaged in soon after I started at the VAC. This began at the policy level, with the development of an equity hiring policy, which we grounded in principles and practices outlined in Canada's Employment Equity Act. Furthermore, the policy emphasized the importance of using a wide variety of channels to reach diverse potential candidates. This policy was created to further ensure equity was central to the Centre's hiring practices and to make a clear statement to candidates regarding the importance of EDI in the organization, with the intention of making all feel welcomed. Part of this commitment included an emphasis on greater diversity in the VAC's programming, including artists in the gallery (which was facilitated through the development of a gallery selection policy that included the principles found in our equity hiring policy) and invited speakers. To ensure our teachers and students also committed to the ongoing development of an inclusive learning environment for diverse members of the Centre's community, we developed an inclusive teaching policy and a set of community guidelines. Further emphasizing inclusivity, we modified the VAC's mandate to highlight our commitment to EDI work. With this work, we consistently asked ourselves how we could create a more inclusive space for diverse stakeholders.

The McClure Gallery Art Hive offered a direct opportunity for folks to experience the inclusivity we were aiming to achieve with our policy and programming changes. Art hives are places that welcome all, especially marginalized individuals and groups, to make art in a communal learning space (Timm-Bottos, 2016). These artistic hubs welcome diverse individuals to engage in art making together (Fortune, et al., 2021). To establish such an environment, art hives are spaces that encourage making without judgment. Non-judgmental spaces are important for individuals who may experience stigmatization and social isolation (Fortune, et. al., 2021). During the art making process, non-evaluative observations are

offered, encouraging communication and relationship development (Lewis, et al., 2021). Given that many in our society may feel intimidated about making and engaging with art and may be in search of more inclusive spaces, this non-evaluative atmosphere is essential for creating a welcoming and safe space for diverse participants to engage with art and art making.

Using welcoming home-made signs, social media posts, information in our brochures and on our website, and emails to organizations that had participated in our community outreach program, we aimed to inform a wide audience about our art hive and hoped to attract new publics. The communications described the nature of art hives, emphasizing the welcoming, inclusive atmosphere, as well as the fact that the McClure Gallery Art Hive offered a free, drop-in style opportunity to make art at the Centre. The latter was particularly important, since art making experiences at this non-profit organization, which received very limited governmental funding during my time as the Director, were usually associated with fees. As course fees can be inaccessible for many, free programming can open participation possibilities (Fortune, et al., 2021).

Starting with our very first art hive, diverse participants came to the gallery. Participants included people of various ages engaging in intergenerational learning, which traditionally doesn't occur in the VAC's regular programming; folks who had never visited our gallery before; and people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. From my observations, the participants felt very at ease navigating the materials, engaging in conversations, and exploring the artwork on the walls. Quite often, they stayed in the art hive for a significant amount of time, typically far longer than anyone would normally spend in the small gallery. Some people engaged in the hive for several hours and expressed that they wished they could stay even longer. Many people participated in multiple art hives, indicating their feelings of belonging.

With the MGAH, the traditional contemporary gallery space transformed into a lively and inclusive environment where diverse participants felt comfortable to enter, freely make, experiment, and connect. From monetary requirements to art world conventions, the art hive removed many of the traditional barriers often present in gallery spaces (Cuyler, 2020). The art hive helped me to imagine a possible future for our organization, where an even more active approach to removing barriers would be enacted. This space offered a tangible and felt metaphor for our goal to increase diversity and inclusivity at the VAC through changes in policy and programming.

Sharing as Central

To grow and deepen our EDI work, we aimed to establish a culture of sharing. By contributing to a project or policy, people can feel a heightened sense of shared ownership, leading to deeper engagement and inclusion. I invited staff members to share their pertinent skills, knowledge, and past experiences. This included working with the VAC's Accountant to pinpoint funds for our initiatives, gathering information about past EDI-related efforts from the Assistant Director, developing new programming with the School of Art's Department Directors and the Gallery Coordinator, devising communications plans with the Communications Coordinator to reach more diverse publics, extensively consulting with the Centre's Registrar, and working with the Centre's Board Members.

Additionally, in 2020, the VAC's volunteer-based EDI Advisory Group was established with a culture of sharing in mind. Composed of five Board Members and the Executive Director, the group met monthly to share ideas and plan actions, with each member sharing their skills and knowledge. In between the monthly sessions, we continued to share ideas online. I set up a Google Drive for the teachers within the VAC's School of Art, which included an EDI section that shared elements of the work conducted by the Advisory Group. This included collected articles, websites, and toolkits related to fostering EDI in teaching and learning environments, as well as our EDI policies. The long-term plan was to create a space for teachers to share EDI materials and chat about their experiences. Ultimately, with this focus on sharing, we aimed to promote the development of a learning community, where diverse members could create knowledge together in an environment grounded in equity and inclusion (Sullivan, 2017).

These efforts to establish a sharing culture primarily focused on the contributions of employees and Board Members. As we moved forward, we planned to engage the VAC's wider community in sharing opportunities in relation to our EDI work in a more active way. The MGAH offered a physical representation of the type of sharing culture we hoped to achieve across the institution. Art hives are public locations where space and ownership are shared and art is situated as a location for engagement and exchange through a process of skill sharing (Fortune, et al., 2021; Lewis, et al., 2021). Within these spaces, each person takes turns being a student and teacher (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015). Everyone is regarded as a key contributor, with unique skills and experiences to share with the community.

At the MGAH, exhibiting McClure Gallery artists, students from the Centre, people from the wider community, the Gallery Coordinator, and I made art side-by-side at a table in a convivial, homey setting. Everyone was encouraged to share their own skills with people around the table. For example, students shared techniques with professional artists and with staff, including me. With this, the traditional hierarchies found in places like museums and

galleries, including the unidirectional master-to-student approach to learning, are disrupted and flattened. With the McClure Gallery Art Hive, the image of the museum or gallery as a shrine, where experts present information grounded in notions of authenticity, universal truths, and established standards of excellence, was radically transformed into a dynamic space for exchange amongst diverse participants (Marstine, 2006). Further supporting a culture of exchange, snacks and beverages were shared during the art hives, creating an opportunity for bonding and connecting over food and inspiring empathy (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015; Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2015). Shin and Bae (2019) asserted, “Cooking, eating, and sharing food are about creating, self-creating, and the production and reproduction of human experience and life” (p. 219). As such, offering food as part of the MGAH created a shift away from the traditionally sterile environment found in contemporary art galleries. Ceramic mugs (often created by the VAC’s students or teachers) were laid out for participants to fill with the available beverages. I witnessed at least one participant adding food and drink from her home to the table. The atmosphere of the gallery shifted as soon as participants sat together, consuming healthy snacks and beverages as they surveyed the art materials they could engage with. Adding further to this culture of sharing, the available art materials were the result of community sourcing. We sent a call out to the Centre’s community members, asking for the donation of art materials. The response was impressive. A wide variety of materials rolled in from the public and local stores. It was clear that many folks wanted to contribute to this community-based initiative through sharing their resources.

This image of diverse community members meeting together and sharing their skills, stories, and perspectives around a table, offered a vivid metaphor for what I hoped the VAC’s future EDI work would look and feel like. Collaboration can be viewed as an important tool in EDI work, as diverse practitioners working together can lead to sustainable and tangible action and eventual change (Hartwell, et al., 2017). Siltanen, Pich, Klodawsky, and Andrew (2017) view multi-vocality as an essential component of change processes. They emphasize that including a range of voices in EDI work can help ensure that diverse opinions and perspectives, as well as points of tension and agreement, are expressed and infused into future directions. I also see the importance of valuing and drawing on the diverse skills that each participant can bring to the table when embarking on EDI work. Experiencing the McClure Gallery Art Hive, I asked myself how we could more authentically and readily draw on diverse community members’ experiences, skills, and perspectives (offering compensation when possible and appropriate) and soften hierarchies through developing a sharing culture in our organization.

Emphasizing Process and Action

Process and action were essential to the direction of our EDI work at the Visual Arts Centre. We worked with small but important changes and aimed to leave space between each change, enabling opportunities for reflection. I engaged in regular check-ins with the community,

where we had opportunities to refine our work together. Compared to a quick and complete overhaul of an organization, this approach allows for more ongoing, process-oriented work, values and builds upon the organization's past, and is less overwhelming to the community, leading to more potential for sustainability. Importantly, the work was not only about developing theoretical policies – I wanted to ensure that everyone was committed to converting our policies into practice. From marketing to accounting, programming development to customer service, teaching to coordination, hiring processes to strategic planning, everyone had an active role in implementing our EDI work. However, so much time and energy were poured into our policies, manuals, and program planning that I often longed to find a way to shift even more of the focus toward process and action.

Art hives are person-centered, with the creative process situated as more important than the final product. Lewis, McLeod, and Li (2021) referred to art hives as practice, highlighting the importance of engaging in action or doing, with the art situated as an extension of the art hive participant. That is, the artistic product is viewed as a record of the processes the artist engages in at an art hive. In these spaces, connections are made through creative action. This emphasis on the process, making connections through doing, and the thinking involved in this engagement aligns with progressive approaches to education (Dewey, 1997). With this, learning experiences start with the act of engagement, or doing, and meaning is made through reflection (Hein, 2012). As George H. Hein (2012) highlighted, museums are particularly well-suited to engage with these elements of progressive education. In particular, he noted the interactive, hands-on approaches in many of today's museums, which invite visitors to actively use their bodies and minds in learning experiences. Such engagement is often seen in non-art museums and is definitely less common in small contemporary galleries, which tend to focus on streamlined final products and pristine exhibition spaces.

With the MGAH, the image of the contemporary gallery as a “white cube” was drastically transformed. Instead of visitors entering the space to passively view the work of professional artists, visitors became active participants who engaged in making art in the gallery space. Through the conversations that naturally developed amongst diverse members around the art hive table, participants engaged in reflective practices associated with the making process. Even though the art hive can be considered a welcoming and safe space and art is typically considered a vital human activity (Dissanayake, 1980), for many, especially adults who have not worked with art in a while, engaging in art making can be intimidating. We found that individuals were often looking for a starting point for their artistic exploration. Lewis, McLeod, and Li (2021) noted that sharing simple techniques with a variety of materials can establish a sense of comfort and ease for participants, jumpstarting their making processes. At the beginning of each MGAH, we offered short workshops led by the exhibiting artist or a teacher at the VAC. These workshops focused on a technique, theme, or material found in the

work exhibited in the gallery. Some participants closely followed these workshops, while others focused on different artistic explorations. In all cases, people engaged in doing – making art and enjoying talking about art with diverse participants. We aimed to offer something for everyone to explore in a hands-on, process-oriented way.

To be effective, EDI efforts require ongoing reflective work, knowledge and skills development, and action throughout an institution (Hartwell, et al., 2017; Ng, et al., 2017; Pun & Kubo, 2022; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). This work necessitates deep commitment and engagement with difficult questions about biases and the ways that we each contribute to or push against the perpetuation of oppression in an institution. Ongoing personal and group-based reflections can support this work, offering opportunities to explore individual and collective identities, positionalities, and directions for the future (Ng, et al., 2017). This work can be uncomfortable and messy. While the work can be difficult, it can be equally energizing and fulfilling. Emphasizing the process-oriented nature of the work and acknowledging that mistakes will inevitably be made along the way can help community members feel ready to contribute in an active fashion. The art hive creation space can offer inspiration – at the art hive table, folks actively explore and experiment with materials, embracing and learning from mistakes and welcoming messiness.

Metaphor for Metamorphosis

It often takes time for the effects of policy change to be seen and deeply felt within communities. Metaphor can be a powerful tool in organizational change efforts, guiding stakeholders to see possible futures, understand the work and challenges ahead, and provide a potential source of motivation (Malvini Redden, et al., 2019). The art gallery education program explored in this article offered a tangible source of inspiration and a sounding board for promoting EDI work in our art education institution.

As soon as it began, the McClure Gallery Art Hive was very well-received, with layered connections to the Visual Arts Centre’s vision for EDI. Thus, I saw the MGAH as an apt metaphor to help inform our EDI work and move this work forward. When asked about and discussing EDI work at the VAC with staff, community partners, funders, Board Members, and the wider public, I regularly used the McClure Gallery Art Hive as a metaphor. This offered a relatable, accessible example, a memorable image of what our EDI vision could achieve, and an anchor that could stimulate excitement about doing the necessary work.

Art galleries, museums, and other arts organizations can benefit from the process of identifying and analyzing a metaphor for EDI that comes from within their own institution. This might be an art education program, an artwork or series of artworks, a space in the institution, or another tangible, vivid, and relatable image or concept that meaningfully

connects with the organization's EDI vision. Based on my experiences with this research, I recommend that the metaphor chosen is something that is readily visible in the organization, is a source of excitement, and deeply connects with the primary goals for the organization's EDI work. This metaphor can help to steer future directions, enhance understandings, and heighten enthusiasm associated with this work.

The McClure Gallery Art Hive transformed this contemporary art gallery through creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for diverse participants, establishing a sharing culture, and championing process and action. These commitments pushed against the traditional image of art museums and galleries in overt, tangible, unthreatening, and relatable ways. These characteristics made the art hive an ideal metaphor for our vision for equity, diversity, and inclusion in this organization during my time there. Visual metaphors have the potential to be a powerful tool to imagine, initiate, guide, and sustain equity, diversity, and inclusion work within art education organizations.

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