



INSTITUTIONAL  
MEMBERSHIP  
PROGRAM

RESPOND  
NOT REACT:

Bridging institutions  
into spaces of safe activism

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# Section 3. Solidarity vs. Institutional Performativity

# What is the issue ?

Institutional culture is no stranger to the art of performance. So familiar that many seem to have adopted performative tactics when faced with questions of accountability and antiracism in their space. As we know, real allies know true solidarity asks for more than moral support or charity. In *'Accomplices Not Allies,'* Indigenous Action Media describes the exploitative relationship that ignites between both the oppressed and oppressor.

**“This relationship can often shift into co-dependency which means they have robbed each other of their own power. Ally “saviours’ have a tendency to create dependency on them and their function as support. No one is here to be saved, we don’t need “missionary allies’ or pity.’(Indigenous Action, 2014)**

This establishes an imbalance where certain individuals are seen as those who assist and others as those who ‘need’ assistance. Solidarity should always be approached from an understanding of equal and shared power relations. Strategically setting goals, actions, and realistically evaluating your limitations when working with racialized communities will help manage outside expectations. Adopting strategies based in activist thought and practices is one way in which arts organisations can start evolving into spaces of actualized solidarity, away from the usual ambiguous performativity and virtue signalling many of us have become accustomed to seeing.

This work can begin through an honest review of your organisation’s past advocacy successes and failures, outline your community’s most pressing concerns, and elaborate on your commitment to these issues. This shows integrity, transparency and will eventually build trust with your staff and the community at large that you serve.

# How does it create harm?

- Actively performing solidarity through empty ‘Solidarity’ statements without any strategic plan in place, whether online or in person, results in the silencing of BIPOC staff lived experiences.
- Indigenous specific grants being awarded to organizations that have had very little history with Indigenous communities or have only recently started their antiracist journey.

“In both cases, these positions may be taking away funding from Indigenous organizations and funnelling them into settler organizations that have ticked all the correct identity funding boxes by doing the bare minimum. If you are responsible for Indigenous philanthropic funding, ask yourself: is the entire Indigenous program resting on the backs of one or two Indigenous employees, or are Indigenous People and perspective built into the organization’s DNA?” ( Michelin, 2022)

- It deceives racialized audiences by outwardly promoting ‘safe spaces’ without adequate internal infrastructure in place to welcome said community. This is a dangerous practice. Especially, when presented openly in job postings preying on emerging and younger BIPOC workers.

- Institutions tend to hide behind artists/employees of colour when facing the public due to criticism. Often, asking those same employees to build their public statements when crisis comes, as a means to escape doing the work themselves for fear of mistake or an inherent misunderstanding of emotional labour.

“Our Indigenous identities quite literally brought added value to Canadian Art. With Indigenous employees, the organization could apply for philanthropic funding to pay for some of our positions, meaning our work wouldn’t cost them much out of pocket. The work that Morgan, Huard and I did contributed to the image of Canadian Art as a progressive and inclusive institution, setting an industry standard.” (Michelin, 2022)

- Many institutions believe in claiming ‘neutrality’ when crisis hits, but are in fact afraid to unravel the implications that may be brought up when talking about true solidarity.

# Case study

We asked our members if they ever made a statement of solidarity prior to the social upheaval and global reckoning which took place during the Summer of 2020. As shown below, more than half of the participants asked had not. It goes without saying that the issues brought to surface in 2020 did not suddenly appear, and have been a constant reality for marginalized communities across North America and the global West. It took a worldwide breakdown to create a shift in our culture and make many realise much of the daily injustices Indigenous, Black and communities of colour have and continue to encounter in their lives.

It did not take long before this movement translated itself into the arts and culture sector, and similar longstanding issues finally were questioned in the open. An important call-out culture ensued as people made sure to question those that purposefully stayed silent all these years.

The internet and our timelines all became flooded with apologies without any promises or demonstrations of actionable steps for the future. The concern of, “Do we need to make a statement?” led many institutions to rush a statement due more to assumed public opinion of what it would look like to not respond, than a true reflection of the values and principles of the institution. But what remained certain is the way we were made to perceive ‘Solidarity’ as an act that should always follow ‘Guilt’.

# What needs to be done to address it (tools)?

- Establish informal communal spaces for your Indigenous/Black staff. Collective care should always be present in order to allow for staff to step away from respectability politics.
- Take the time to consider who your institution serves and who it does not. Once understood make sure that both sides are clearly reflected in all your programming and initiatives.
- Engage your space in mutual partnerships with Indigenous and Black arts led organisations from your community. If your capacity allows, make sure to vary your involvement with more than one racialized organisation.



- Personalising and openly discussing with your staff what you would like to share and how a public statement would support your internal values of ethics and advocacy. Reflect on your relationship to land acknowledgements and public/solidarity statements. How can you approach these with honesty and become less reactionary in times of urgency?
- Practising active listening with your staff, your patrons, and collaborators whenever they need to be heard. Remember that active listening should always be followed by a plan of action.
- The work of showing solidarity in institutional culture does not reside behind the endless paperwork, meetings, and administrative tasks it requires but through the tangible actions that results from these administrative decisions

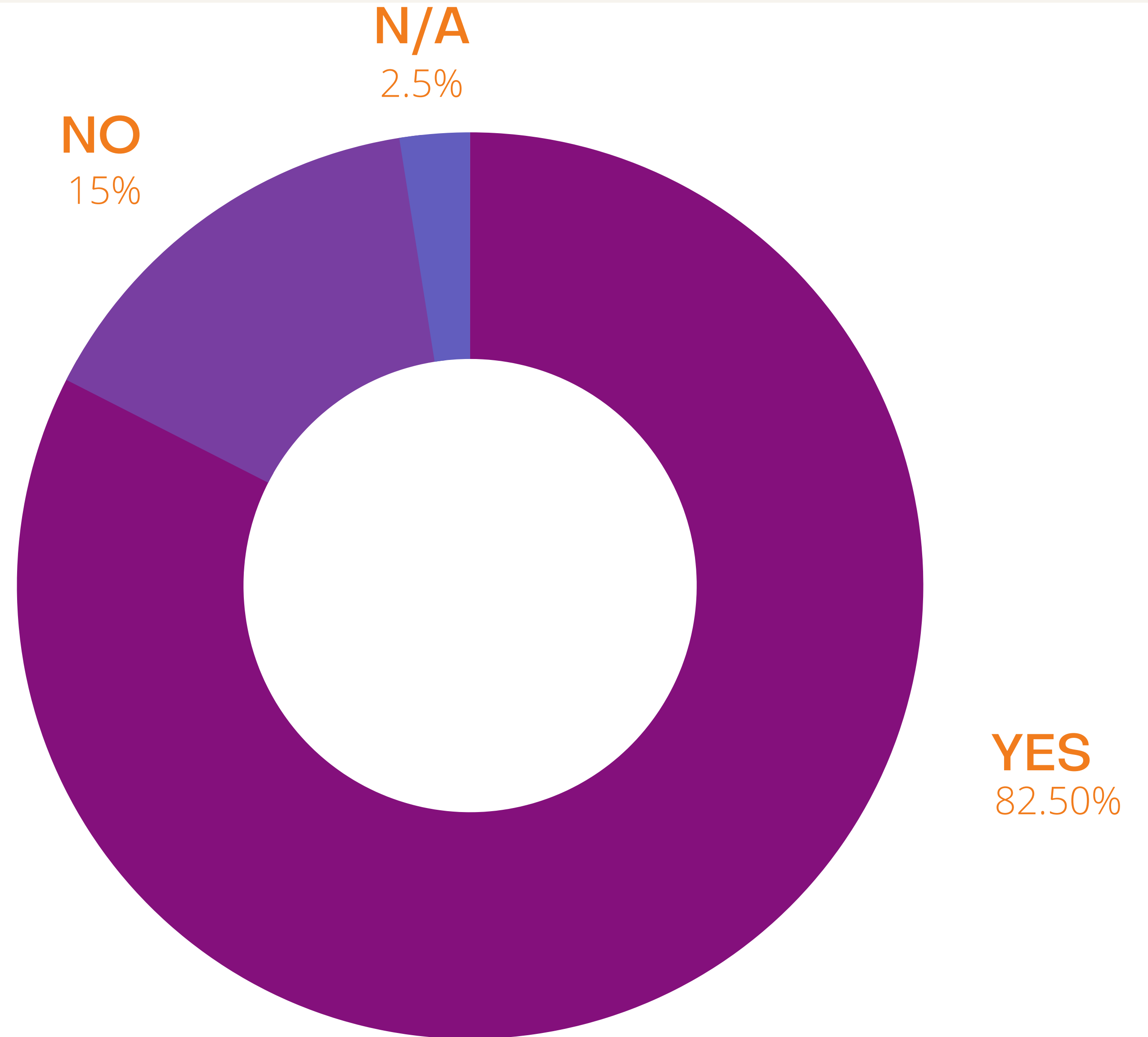
*“The idea that the document is itself an action is what could allow the institution to block recognition of the work that there is to do. The system of rewarding organizations for their performance on diversity and equality not only risks concealing forms of inequality and racism but also supports forms of organizational pride, which reorient the politics of diversity work away from challenging how institutions constitute their identity and toward a promotion of that identity.”  
(Ahmed, 2006)*

**SARA AHMED**

# Data

AS OF JUNE 2022

Has your institution made public statements in solidarity with political movements or social issues?

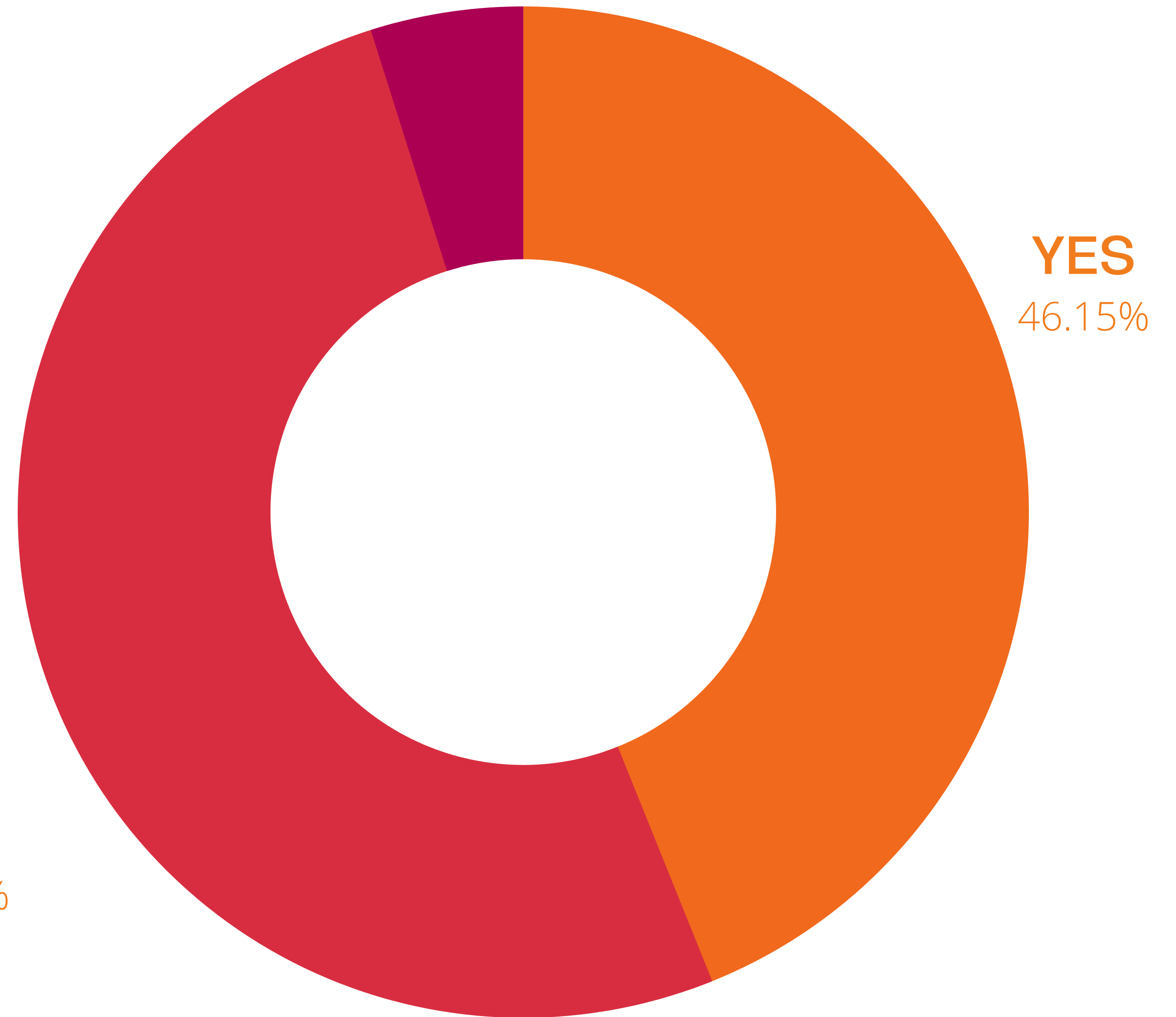


\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program

# Data

AS OF JUNE 2022

Prior to 2020, had your institution/organization made public statements in solidarity with political movements or social issues?



**NO**  
53.85%

**YES**  
46.15%

\*Data collected from the Institutional Membership Program



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If you have any further questions concerning any of the materials above, please contact us via Email. Find our contact information listed below.

**Contact email**  
info@icca.art