

Aboriginal Curatorial Collective: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

***A Proposal for a Framework for Action
by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective***

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to

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The Aboriginal Curatorial Collective

A Proposal for A Framework for Action

Introduction

In April of 2005, the Aboriginal curatorial community came together to establish themselves as the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC) to develop A Proposal for A Framework for Action that will provide long-term strategic support for the Aboriginal curatorial community and the Aboriginal curatorial residents. The ACC launched this initiative in response to the existing authority of the non-Aboriginal curatorial and academic community within the discipline of Aboriginal arts in Canada. The curatorial and literary hegemony by non-Aboriginal curators and academics is adversely affecting both the employment and publishing opportunities of Aboriginal curators and Aboriginal curatorial residents. Furthermore, the existing status quo is silencing Aboriginal voices on Aboriginal art history. There exists a dominant group of non-aboriginal curators and academics in Canada who are identified as experts in their fields of Aboriginal arts and are dominating and controlling major publishing and curatorial contracts to the detriment of the Aboriginal curatorial community. Further, the Canada Council has recently supported a non-Aboriginal expert with a contract to work with the Canada Council Art Bank on an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art for the Canadian Embassy in Washington to coincide with the official opening of the new National Museum of the American Indian.

The lack of Aboriginal driven exhibitions is also representative of the lack of Aboriginal curators working in the field. This has resulted in only exacerbating the marginality of Aboriginal artists, and curators, and in particular, new and emerging Aboriginal artists and curators. The number of Aboriginal curators currently employed indeterminately by an art institution in Canada is less than ten individuals in the entire country. If this is current reality, how many Aboriginal curators are successfully securing an indeterminate position based on the support of the Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program?

In response to these pertinent and taxing issues, the ACC is proposing a Round Table Discussion, in collaboration with the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat, including the Writing and Publishing Program, and the Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program. The purpose of the Round Table is to identify and discuss both short-term and long-term issues, challenges and opportunities and to discuss and develop a long-term strategic plan that will enhance and support an Aboriginal presence with the arts. Furthermore, membership is open to all Aboriginal curators active in the curatorial community, and the ACC is inviting the participants recommended for the proposed Round Table to become active members of the Collective.

Study, Analysis and Findings:

Currently, there is a noticeable lack of support for Aboriginal curators working in the curatorial field to develop, document and publish their critical and supportive work on Aboriginal artists and

the arts. ACC strongly notes that there is a blatant under-representation of published Aboriginal materials and a scant body of work documenting our contributions to important developments and milestones in our distinct art history. More often than not, our unpublished material is inaccessible to researchers, students, academics and our colleagues in the Aboriginal curatorial community. A lack of reference material relating to our curatorial practice, the absence of our contributions in the institutions of art in Canada, in effect, validate and support the continued literary and curatorial hegemony by non-aboriginal writers and curators currently well entrenched and tenured in their privileged institutional positions. Based on their long published history and quality publications, they continue to dominate writing and publishing grants and private sector support.

The ACC feels that it is integral that we work with the Canada Council for the Arts to develop and co-implement a strategy for action to improve the existing and long-term opportunities for Aboriginal curators and curatorial residents and work together towards building a level playing field to address the current discrepancies that exist in non-aboriginal institutions where aboriginal curators and residents work and in the writing and publication community at large.

While the Canada Council has supported and hosted the first historic curatorial meeting for Aboriginal curators in February 1997 “Shaping the Future of Aboriginal Curatorial Practice”, there has been no formal program review of the Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program. For the purpose of our proposal, we feel that two key recommendations from the 1997 discussions identify that there is an urgent need for on-going support for Aboriginal critics and curators in writing, research and publishing in order to contribute to the discourse of art history writ large. As well, the findings also identify on-going support is required to provide Aboriginal curators with opportunities to meet and network. This recommendation should not be narrowly construed to the Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program only, but instead, it should be liberally interpreted to provide on-going support for the Aboriginal curatorial community to meet and network annually.

One noticeable oversight is the lack of performance management and annual reporting on the effectiveness of existing Aboriginal programs offered by the Canada Council, in particular, how success is measured, and what performance indicators are used to monitor success and failure. For performance measures are integral to ensuring appropriate program adjustments are made on an on-going basis and reformulated into long-term strategic planning. The ACC recognize and affirms that on-going performance management and reporting are an essential component to our a framework for action. The Treasury Board Secretariat Evaluation Policy clear states that:

Managers have a responsibility to monitor the performance of policies, programs and initiatives - to make sound decisions and to report on performance to higher departmental authorities, to Parliament and to the Canadian public.

Evaluation is a management tool that can operate throughout the life-cycle of a policy, program or initiative. It can help managers design and implement reliable performance measurement systems. It can also periodically assess effectiveness in achieving objectives, impacts, both intended and unintended, continued relevance and alternative ways of achieving expected results. (See Annex C)

Summary And Recommendations

It is now eight years since the meeting “Shaping the Future of the Aboriginal Curatorial Practice (1997)”. Only 2 of the original 12 participants (Lynn Hill, Arthur Renwick, Rose Spahan, Mark Handley, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Morgan Wood, Marcia Crosby, July Papatsie, **Tom Hill (Woodland Cultural Centre)**, **Lee-Ann Martin (Canadian Museum of Civilization)**, Barry Ace and Ryan Rice) are employed as curators. In contrast to the lack of support and apparent decline in the original group, the ACC has identified a slight increase in the number of new and emerging professional curators actively working across Canada and abroad, and this is encouraging. Even with these encouraging statistics and support from the Canada Council’s Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program, there is still an under-representation of gainfully employed Aboriginal curators resulting in a noticeable absence of documented activity and quality publications of curatorial writings by Aboriginal curators.

An overall conclusion based on the findings of our consultations is that the ACC has engendered frustrations, discontent and cynicism about the status quo of the curatorial practice, and yet an unwavering dedication pervades the area of Aboriginal driven exhibitions and writings (in the form of non-traditional publications and documentation), in spite of the lack of institutional support.

ACC offers the following recommendations to the Canada Council for the Arts:

coordinate and fund a Round Table Discussion composed of candidates recommended by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. The ACC recommends a 2 day Round Table Discussion hosted by the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat to be held in Ottawa. The ACC recommends the inclusion of the Coordinator, Aboriginal Arts Secretariat; Program Officer for the Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program; Program Officer for the Aboriginal Writing and Publication component of the Writing and Publication Program; and a representative from senior management of the Canada Council as recommended by the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat;

identify and clarify all arts related policies by the Canada Council, Canadian Heritage and other relevant sources relied upon pertaining specifically to Aboriginal Peoples. The ACC recognizes that Canadian Heritage, Canada Council for the Arts and the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat have specific policy mechanisms for program development, enhancement and grant support for Aboriginal Peoples. As well, the ACC recognizes that there are specific guidelines in place that all Aboriginal candidates must follow to ensure successful application for support. The ACC notes that there is a clear demarcation between policies and guidelines. A policy is predominately based in law, while guidelines are simply procedures everyone must follow to standardize, for example, an application process. The ACC is interested in discussing and recommending effective strategic policy advancement for Aboriginal curators, as a distinction between simple changes to existing guidelines and procedures;

develop specific workshops on publishing and alternative forms of publication. The ACC recognizes a forum for the presentation and discussion of existing and emerging forms of publication of catalogues, magazines, and journals, both printed and electronic. Furthermore, access, presentation, and negotiation with private sector publishers to effectively access the domestic and international arts community.

acknowledge and access international collaborations. The ACC recognizes the potential for private, municipal, regional, provincial, national and international curatorial and publication opportunities. There is a need to explore a broad range of curatorial writing and publishing opportunities for Aboriginal curators and Aboriginal curatorial residents to further enhance and heighten the profile and contribution of our community;

develop and enhance the Inuit curatorial community. The ACC recognizes and affirms the importance of Inuit curators in this non-Inuit dominated area. The ACC would like to discuss on-going support and studies for and by Inuit curators and the need for a documentation and publication on Inuit writings on Inuit art;

develop and maintain an active contact list of Aboriginal curators in Canada and abroad. The ACC recognizes the need for networks, including electronic, for the dissemination of program information, opportunities and publications related to our community. The ACC would like to explore the long-term possibility of the incorporation of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective for on-going annual financial support;

examine the possibility and interest of expanding the collective to include aboriginal artists. The ACC acknowledges the intimate relationship between artist and curator. The ACC has included two established artists in the ACC to ensure artist representation. A dialogue is required to further investigate the need, desire and viability for a joint venture with Aboriginal artists;

development of specific program and grant support for critical curatorial writings on Aboriginal artists and arts. The ACC recognized the unfair playing field that exists between the Aboriginal curatorial community and the non-aboriginal curatorial and academic communities. The ACC would like to address this discrepancy and explore possibilities for writing, research and publication support. Furthermore, the ACC would like to develop a strategy for consolidating an Anthology of Aboriginal Curatorial Writings on Aboriginal artists and art. A long-term strategic plan is necessary to ensure documentation of our 40 year history, including present and future contributions;

Round Table Proposal:

Stage 1. *Consultations and Interviews* - to identify and consolidate core issues, challenges and recommendations of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective as a proposal for a Round Table Discussion. The proposal submitted to the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat of the Canada Council for the Arts for funding consideration.

Stage 2. *A Round Table Discussion* - The submitted proposal by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective be accepted at an interim agenda for a 2-day Round Table Discussion to be hosted and funded by the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat of the Canada Council for the Arts to be held in Ottawa, and to determine essential components for a Framework for Action and Co-Implementation. Participants in the Round Table Discussion will be recommended by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and from the Canada Council for the Arts. The participants will be asked to focus on two things: understanding the nature and dimensions of issues, challenges and opportunities from their perspective and on how they can be resolved; and developing a Framework for Action and Co-Implementation.

Stage 3. *A Framework for Action and Co-Implementation* - a series of endorsed recommendations and actions that Aboriginal Curatorial Collective participants and the Canada Council Team could implement to create conditions of success for the Aboriginal curatorial community and ACC participants and the Aboriginal arts community more generally.

Conclusion:

Based on the following findings and recommendations of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, the proposal for an Aboriginal Curatorial Round Table Discussion is not only timely, but imperative. To address the existing challenges and blatant absences within the curatorial landscape diaspora, the Canada Council needs to implement a program review of existing policies and guidelines pertinent to the Aboriginal curatorial community, and work towards a co-implementation as well as performance management of recommended strategic policy change emanating from the Aboriginal curatorial community. Although the recommendations brought forth by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective address broad ranging issues, they must not be construed as representative of problems and discrepancies that may exist or that may be identified by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective writ large. The proposed Round Table will unequivocally identify other pertinent issues, for example, emanating from the regions, provinces and territories. These unique issues must also be addressed and given specific attention.

Finally, it is anticipated that the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat of the Canada Council for the Arts will recognize and acknowledge the need for this important Round Table and will bring this proposal to the attention of all relevant representatives of relevant programs and to the attention of senior management for support.