

Legal Name

Brooklyn Arts Exchange Inc

Project Title

To host Dan Fishback at BAX/Brooklyn Arts Exchange to imagine and explore new approaches to demand building for theater and contemporary dance

DDCF Grant Number

2013227

Project Progress and Successes

The mission of this project is to create programming at BAX that organically responds to the needs of diverse LGBTQ communities in New York City, such that BAX becomes a go-to location for queer cultural events, tailored to the full spectrum of LGBTQ experience, including for LGBTQ people of color -- an internally diverse population that has been historically marginalized in the institutional performance world.

While this project is focused on BAX as an institution, it is also one component of a larger initiative -- The Helix Queer Performance Network -- which is a collaboration between BAX, La MaMa Experimental Theater, and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics.

The mission of this project at BAX can be broken down to three objectives: 1) to explore ways in which BAX's organizational practices can be adapted to better serve diverse LGBTQ communities, 2) to create programming that prioritizes LGBTQ community need over mainstream/heteronormative criteria for success, and 3) to dismantle white supremacy within the LGBTQ arts world. Our guiding principle in this work has been: A queer arts program that does not actively serve QPOC (queer people of color) cannot truly call itself a queer arts program.

In 2014, our three experimental initiatives were in curation and education.

1. CURATION

This fall, BAX hosted The Helix Queer Performance Network's ongoing series SUBMERGE, which aims to celebrate the artistic achievements of LGBTQ people of color. For "SUBMERGE @ BAX," instead of selecting individual artists, we collaborated with three guest QPOC curators for three distinct nights of performance. Our goal for this series was to serve QPOC artistic leadership and curatorial vision.

Beginning with our initial meeting at BAX in August, the three curators -- Maria Bauman, Zavé Martohardjono and Zachary Frater -- worked together and individually to craft evenings of performance that were aesthetically different, but unified in a spirit of community empowerment, radical love and institutional critique. Bauman's evening, "Voices UP!" kicked off the series, and featured four queer Black women singer-songwriters, performing round-robin style to create a communal aesthetic. In the following week, for "ReduX," Martohardjono invited three queer Asian-American artists to "remix

tradition" and explore queerness in the Asian diaspora. Concluding the series, Frater used his curation budget as prize money for "Miss Krayola," a drag pageant featuring 17 established, emerging and first-time Black, Latino and Asian drag artists, thus radically experimenting with the format of "curation." Frater wrote in his curator's statement:

"I'm approaching this project thinking about community space, about how institutions can be more welcoming to marginalized communities, those with limited access to creative resources. I'm thinking about how marginalized communities are often tokenized by institutions and how the privileged and the disenfranchised can share creative spaces with one another without enforcing a hierarchy on our creative productions. I'm thinking about curation as outreach, and how the work we do inside institutions and the resources we hold can better reach those on the periphery."

Each evening was well-attended by diverse audiences that drew from multiple LGBTQ communities, as well as repeat-attendees who returned to SUBMERGE after having meaningful experiences at prior nights. Two middle-aged women who came to "Miss Krayola" remarked that they hadn't seen a drag show in years, but when they heard about it at "Voices UP!," they knew they wanted to come "support [their] sisters."

2. EDUCATION

Over the past three years, resident artist Dan Fishback had previously taught three installments of his 8-week workshop "NEEDING IT: Solo Performance in Queer Community," in which students develop their own work while studying the history of queer performance in NYC. This spring, he taught a fourth installment, while concurrently teaching a new, advanced-level class, "NEEDING IT ALL." Over this 8-week period, 16 students, mostly youth and mostly QPOC, studied at BAX, and met with a total of four established queer performing artists.

NEEDING IT functions as an introduction to queer performance art for many students who might only have a passing knowledge of that world and its history. It is also often the first performance situation the students have experienced in which they can feel totally comfortable expressing their queerness (or their racial identities) without censoring themselves. One student remarked, in a post-class interview:

"If you go to a regular audition or rehearsal, there's this system in place, and for me, as a queer person of multi colors it's always like 'Oh I have to fit myself into a place that I don't necessarily identify with,' and with [this class] it was like: you don't have to do that here."

The class also helped introduce students to the world of experimental theater that BAX supports, even beyond queer performance. The same student remarked:

"I'm from New York City, but [the class] opened my eyes to how much more there actually is here, which is kind of shocking, because I've been here all my life. But Dan was really generous, being like, 'Okay, now you know you want to do this, you can try this place, you can talk to these people.' He was so generous. Now I know there are these places where I can go to, and these people who are doing new and exciting things."

The most transformative moment of NEEDING IT occurred when students watched a documentary on the legendary Black trans activist and performer Marsha P. Johnson, who was until then unknown to the majority of the class. The subsequent discussion was transformative for many of the students, for whom this was a moment to reflect on the erasure of Black queer and trans history, and the effect of that erasure on their own lives.

The afore-quoted student told us:

"Dan introduced us to Marsha P. Johnson, and I was like: 'Why have I not known about her?' There's still something about experiencing that, where I'm like: okay, now I have an idea about where I need to go as an artist. It was eye-opening and spiritual."

The student body of NEEDING IT ALL, our advanced class, consisted of six young artists, mostly women and mostly QPOC. After their final performance at BAX, this team of solo artists continued to meet as a group, independently of Fishback, and continued to organize performances together, as a performance "band" called A Beautiful Desperation. We helped them produce an encore performance of their final pieces in July at the Nuyorican Poets Café, which was sold out to a mostly QPOC audience. They then performed brand new works together at Dixon Place in December. What began as a BAX educational program developed seamlessly into an independent, majority-woman, majority-QPOC artistic company. In their work, they have been vocal about their origins in a program of BAX and the Helix Queer Performance Network, and so their ongoing work has become a form of outreach for the venue that brought them together.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

This year, we have taken steps to support and serve the needs of queer students of color, queer artists of color and queer curators of color. But we are very aware that, until we are also supporting and serving queer administrators of color and queer teachers of color, we are stuck in a "diversity" model that emerges from a white queer desire for "progress," and revolves around white queer leadership. We are not satisfied with this model, and our challenge has been to discover ways to empower and serve QPOC leadership without the financial resources to create new staff and teaching positions.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

We noticed during our webinar with the other grantee institutions that the majority of grantees who were trying to build a POC audience base were being administered by white people. We understand that this racial leadership divide has the potential to create an us-vs.-them dynamic that limits positive change to the superficial level of season-by-season programming. For a historically white arts institution to truly support POC art, artists, audiences and communities, the institution itself needs to change, to hire leadership from within communities, and follow that leadership directly.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

<http://events.bax.org/2014-15-performance-season/voices-up/>

<http://events.bax.org/2014-15-performance-season/redux/>

<http://events.bax.org/2014-15-performance-season/miss-krayola-newcomer-pageant/>

<http://accessbax.bax.org/winter-2014-workshops/needing-it/>

<http://accessbax.bax.org/winter-2014-workshops/needing-it-all/>

<http://helixqpn.org>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Yes. Marya Warshaw, email or phone: marya@bax.org, 718-832-0018, ex. 214