



SKETCH

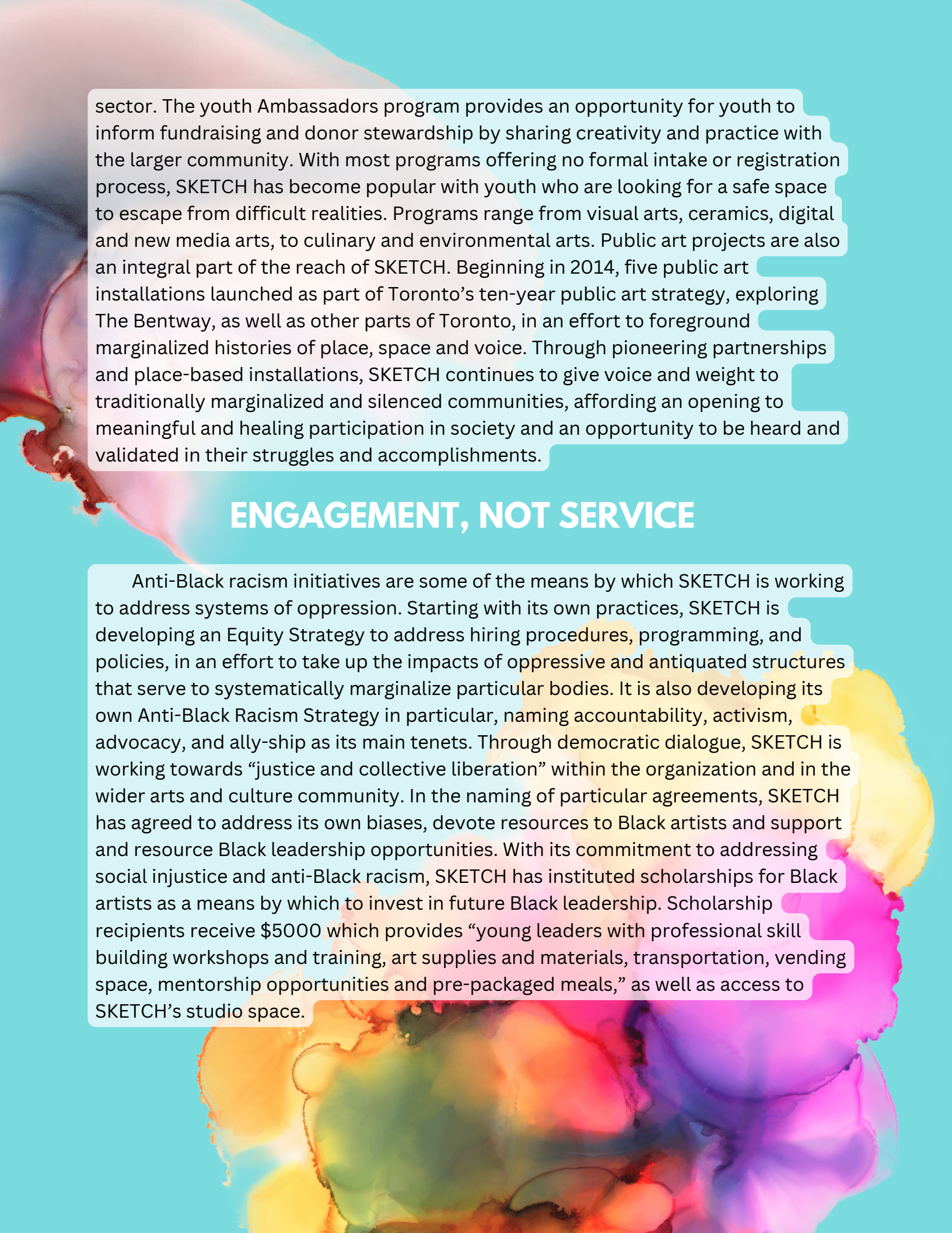
For over twenty years, SKETCH has provided an artistic haven for marginalized youth and those experiencing homelessness in the Greater Toronto Area. Originally created in 1996 as a collective space for marginalized youth to experience the benefits of art, SKETCH has grown in its scope and mandate. Incorporated in 2001, and formally registered as a non-profit charity in 2003, SKETCH uses the arts to engage and empower thousands of youth per year, aged between 16-29 who are experiencing homelessness or navigating poverty. It is an opportunity to experience the powerful benefits of being involved in a creative community, and developing leadership skills and “self-sufficiency in the arts” as well as to “cultivate social and environmental change through the arts”(1).

As an organization that prides itself on engagement with youth, SKETCH is cognizant of the impact that young people have on culture and society and believes that youth are the co-creators of vibrant communities. SKETCH gives youth a meaningful opportunity to create impactful change in a culture that often regards them as people who do not contribute to society. It is a space for young people to be themselves without judgement. From the unique aromas wafting from the kitchen to the diverse art adorning the halls of the studio, it is obvious that individuality is encouraged, and SKETCH takes up radical space in its west-end Toronto community. In its engagement with youth, SKETCH works in heterodox approaches to empower youth in creating lasting societal change.

ENGAGEMENT, NOT SERVICE

SKETCH offers three programming streams with which to engage (not serve) young people from across Canada. They include Art Leadership, Arts Production and Arts Wellness. These streams work to foster capacities to become “change agents through art and culture”(2). The Arts Wellness stream allows youth access to fresh and nutritious food through a number of opportunities. Through resource distribution packages, youth can make appointments to pick up prepared meals or fresh ingredients, as well as harm reduction, wellness, and arts supplies. In partnership with FoodShare Toronto, youth also have access to free Good Food Boxes, delivered weekly. Uplift Kitchen orchestrates the delivery of groceries, clothing, and prepared meals to Queer, Trans, Black and Indigenous People of Colour. Under the umbrella of Arts Wellness, SKETCH also ensures access to art supplies and free food, digital technology and equipment loans or honoraria to purchase needed materials. Finally, with its Arts Wellness programming, SKETCH offers access to harm reduction and referrals as well as mental health supports (3).

Within the Arts Production Stream “young artists engage in production residencies and mentorships to create original new works in multiple artistic mediums, for exhibition, showcase, sales and public art production (4)”. Other opportunities have included a media arts residency that explores the politics of social change in art in the midst of a global pandemic. There are also paid opportunities for Queer, Trans, Black and Indigenous people of colour (QTBIPOC) artists to engage in work which furthers their artistic careers and livelihoods. In Arts Leadership, arts and cultural initiatives prioritize marginalized youth through community leadership opportunities. The NextUp! Leaders Lab is a year-long pilot project focused on Indigenous and Black arts leaders who are leading their own initiatives and preparing for senior level leadership positions in the arts and culture



sector. The youth Ambassadors program provides an opportunity for youth to inform fundraising and donor stewardship by sharing creativity and practice with the larger community. With most programs offering no formal intake or registration process, SKETCH has become popular with youth who are looking for a safe space to escape from difficult realities. Programs range from visual arts, ceramics, digital and new media arts, to culinary and environmental arts. Public art projects are also an integral part of the reach of SKETCH. Beginning in 2014, five public art installations launched as part of Toronto's ten-year public art strategy, exploring The Bentway, as well as other parts of Toronto, in an effort to foreground marginalized histories of place, space and voice. Through pioneering partnerships and place-based installations, SKETCH continues to give voice and weight to traditionally marginalized and silenced communities, affording an opening to meaningful and healing participation in society and an opportunity to be heard and validated in their struggles and accomplishments.

ENGAGEMENT, NOT SERVICE

Anti-Black racism initiatives are some of the means by which SKETCH is working to address systems of oppression. Starting with its own practices, SKETCH is developing an Equity Strategy to address hiring procedures, programming, and policies, in an effort to take up the impacts of oppressive and antiquated structures that serve to systematically marginalize particular bodies. It is also developing its own Anti-Black Racism Strategy in particular, naming accountability, activism, advocacy, and ally-ship as its main tenets. Through democratic dialogue, SKETCH is working towards “justice and collective liberation” within the organization and in the wider arts and culture community. In the naming of particular agreements, SKETCH has agreed to address its own biases, devote resources to Black artists and support and resource Black leadership opportunities. With its commitment to addressing social injustice and anti-Black racism, SKETCH has instituted scholarships for Black artists as a means by which to invest in future Black leadership. Scholarship recipients receive \$5000 which provides “young leaders with professional skill building workshops and training, art supplies and materials, transportation, vending space, mentorship opportunities and pre-packaged meals,” as well as access to SKETCH's studio space.

PHYLLIS NOVAK

Phyllis Novak, a trained actor, and the Artistic Director of SKETCH, started working with youth 28 years ago and instantly became inspired by the creativity in the community. She eventually gave up acting and focused her attention on workshops and weekly visual arts drop-in sessions, as way to subvert and challenge traditional responses to homelessness and poverty. Her talents and passion for the creative arts have given her a means by which to interact with Toronto's most vulnerable sectors and engage in the cultivation of meaningful projects. As a white woman in Canada, Novak recognizes the privilege she possesses and brings a self-awareness of this privilege she holds at the expense of traditionally racialized and marginalized communities. She works to educate herself about the struggles of marginalized groups and acts as an advocate and an ally in various capacities.

GOVERNANCE & FUNDING

SKETCH has a team of almost 45 people, including an Executive Director, and many employees in training, who are learning to use the SKETCH model of mentorship. The 9-member board oversees the strategic direction of the organization and youth are always at the center of decision-making processes, through committees, advisory boards and fundraising. The annual operating budget of \$2.3 million is used to cover expenses including employee salaries and SpaceShare, SKETCH's event rental social enterprise helps to mitigate the costs incurred by the organization by offering day and evening events space, accommodating up to 220 people. SKETCH also receives funding from federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government through grants, as well as from foundations, corporations, and private donations. The process of applying for and receiving government grants is highly competitive and includes heavy, evidence-based reporting. This is a necessary process, given that approximately 25% of government funding goes towards SKETCH's operating costs. Novak recognizes the inaccessibility of the grant-writing process as a barrier to receiving funding and considers what the process might be like for people doing this work on the margins. Still, the importance of the work being done by SKETCH is not fully appreciated by government granting bodies, leaving the funding process difficult, time-consuming and ultimately inaccessible. Research must amplify programming that stands in contrast to programs with traditional approaches to youth poverty and homelessness. It must illuminate people of colour who are leaders in the sector and give voice to those who have been marginalized through story-telling and qualitative methodology.

CONCLUSION

Art is innovation and has the capabilities to create dialogues about changing normative and traditional structures of inequality that side-line particular, and often racialized bodies. The profound impact of art and its contributions to the well-being of people are unmistakable at SKETCH, as it offers Toronto youth who are marginalized by traditional methods of teaching and learning, a means by which to create vibrant communities and social change through art. SKETCH enables youth to learn and produce, in order to reframe the marginalized perspective and become empowered as leaders of cultural and social change. Using arts as a means to restorative justice and including youth instead of criminalizing them (5) is part of the innovation SKETCH is bringing to Canada. SKETCH is creating a platform of education, mentorship, and peer leadership where the understanding is that creativity comes from those who are living on the margins; helping to foster this creativity will continue to contribute to Canadian society.

More information on SKETCH can be found here:

<https://www.sketch.ca/>

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4. Sketch, "About," last modified 2021. <https://www.sketch.ca/about/who-we-are/>
5. Phyllis Novak in conversation with the author, 22 May 2018.