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Reena Dewan: Championing Accessibility in the Indian Arts Ecosystem

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From corporate to creative leader Reena Dewan, Director of Kolkata Center for Creativity and President of ICOM India, talks about her commitment to accessibility, equality and social inclusion in the arts: promoting the multidisciplinary and creating more friendly art spaces for the public.



Courtesy of Kolkata Center of Creativity

Shall we start with expanding on your career journey and how you got to where you are now?

Well! It's a very weird journey, starting from the time, when my family came from, what is now known as Pakistan at the time of the Partition of India, almost barehanded as refugees and settled in Old Delhi. As a child I was not privileged to have access to fine arts, but by living in Old Delhi, I cogitate that heritage, history, traditional practices of art, cooking, games and textiles became part of my DNA. My

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invited to be its director. Meanwhile, I was chosen as a fellow for an International Leadership program in Arts Management. This was a turning point in my career as this not only taught me about arts management but also gave me an opportunity to do secondments at the Tate, Whitworth and Manchester Art Galleries. At about this time Kolkata Center for Creativity was being founded and I joined this amazing project in a leadership role.



KCC DEAI -Accessibility - People who are differently-abled visually experiencing Tactile art.
Courtesy of Kolkata Center for Creativity

At the Kolkata Centre for Creativity, how would you describe the work, your vision and the founder's vision?

For me, art cannot exist in a single form, so I included a multi-disciplinary approach in programming at KCC, incorporating fine arts, performing arts, craft and design. My experience of fellowship programs taught me the value of capacity building to empower artists and develop leaders, hence my focus has primarily been on Arts Fellowships, Arts Laboratories and Learnings. Including research, development practice and presentation of arts along with its application and accessibility, I aim to provide a connect between artists, scholars, students, enthusiasts and people from different communities. At KCC my vision is to create an environment where people with different choices, identities and needs are included and not made to feel marginalized. Our chairperson, Ms. Richa Agarwal, is very passionate about supporting young artists, so an Emerging Artist platform was created, where young artists are presented and offered critical discussion with experts for development in their practice.

You're clearly so passionate about working with communities & social inclusion, let's talk about that.

Social inclusion for me stems from a very personal space. My mother in the last thirteen years of her life was suffering from Alzheimer's. Visiting KCC with her I realized how un-inclusive we are, none of our infrastructures or trainings involve understanding needs of a diverse audience. I understood the importance of public spaces being equipped with infrastructure and trained staff to address the diverse needs of its public otherwise why are they called public spaces, isn't it?

Accessibility and inclusion for me derives from equality that needs to be supported with equity, it is difficult to talk of equality when our infrastructure, understanding and programs are made for a certain set of people who are called 'normal'. But who defines normal? When we are not creating braille books on art, tactile artworks for people with different kind of visual capabilities how can we say that the excluded person is a disabled? We are making them disabled by not including all this in our infrastructure, learnings and practice. They are simply differently-abled and if we cannot create diverse access options for people with different abilities, then we need to question our understanding of disabilities.

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KCC DEAI - Diversity & Inclusion - Exhibition of Artists who have Autism.
Courtesy of Kolkata Center for Creativity.

What measures are you taking at KCC to address such important issues?

Under the Accessibility Program at KCC, I made sure that we not only invite diverse audience into the centre, but also go into their spaces. Working with them has enriched my own understanding: we created tactile artworks inspired by Jogen Chowdhury and launched our first braille artist catalog on Ravinder Reddy. My dream is now to create a permanent accessibility zone in KCC for all people to engage with, to foster compassion and understanding about different abilities. Once you make people experience how the world seems from perspective of a differently-abled, then they are more compassionate.

What are the highlights and challenges of your position, especially during the pandemic that very sadly rages on today?

Firstly I had ensured the well-being of my team, which is my first priority, I looked at the costs we had to save at that time, and thanks to my corporate experience, we could cut down on many expenses that were not essential. The entire programming had to be changed, which was actually heartbreaking. It was very concerning as the already minuscule economic opportunities, for artists suddenly became negligible. So I thought, we must create sources of income for artists, scholars and arts managers, taking advantage of the new online attention.

This was a time for capacity building; the series 'Artist to Entrepreneur', became a huge hit as it included local, national and international artists and arts managers working in multi-disciplinary art forms who shared their journeys, experiences, learnings and challenges. There is so much wisdom outside the school structure, which should be developed and shared. So in a series 'Indigenous Wisdom', communities and scholars were invited to have conversations on sustainable practices in their daily lifestyle.

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KCC DEAI - Accessibility - Experiential ZONE - people experiencing tactile artworks of renowned artist Jogen Chowdhary.

Courtesy of Kolkata Center for Creativity.

Bringing in capacity building, at KCC who are your main audiences and who do you want to expand?

There are three sets of audience, all equally important, one is the art practitioners and scholars, for whom presentations and capacity building programs are organized. Second, is the enthusiasts and people from non-arts, with 130 billion people to cater to, there are huge possibilities and third are the marginalized communities.

Through KCC DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusivity) we work for social inclusion using arts for the development of marginalized and differently-abled communities, empowering them through self-expression. Last year, we launched 'Empowering Futures', a multi-nation project involving artists and children with autism and this year we have started curating participatory community workshops focusing on women in shelter homes. These are the projects I'm more passionate about as I believe, unlike many other fields, Art is not defined by any logic, formula or structure hence includes everyone to use it as a tool for self-expression. Art is not only something to be hung on the wall but something that has an application for social inclusion.

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