

Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association

INNOVATION

Like many other cities, the ongoing pandemic and the associated restrictions on public gatherings have largely eliminated public events, festivals, and celebrations that were planned for downtown Vancouver. VMF Winter Arts was conceived through a brainstorm between the DVBIA and Vancouver Mural Festival (VMF) to address this issue and come up with an innovative way to enhance public spaces during a pandemic and do something completely new for Vancouver.

The purpose of VMF Winter Arts was to animate public spaces in a safe way and give people a new experience they could engage with while they were downtown. It also helped to introduce a different type of art (digital/AR) to the public and showcase the work of a lesser known set of artists – digital and AR creators. This also supports part of the DVBIA's placemaking goals, which include supporting and engaging with a diverse set of artists from all backgrounds and skillsets. The intended audience for VMF Winter Arts was open to anyone, young and old, who may be downtown or those looking for a self-guided art experience outdoors. The desired outcomes were to support the downtown community with a free public activation series, showcase digital artwork to the public, and above all, give people something to look forward to or experience during the pandemic while still adhering to physical distancing protocols. Dispersing the open-air digital gallery across downtown and leaving it accessible 24/7 was intentional and worked to mitigate any chance of large public gatherings or crowds.

OUTCOME

VMF Winter Arts was hugely successful as a brand new public space art activation that brought life back to public spaces in downtown Vancouver and engaged a diverse public audience, all while being a COVID safe activity. The AR installations got people to explore downtown due to the multiple spread out location foot print of the project. Looking at how effective Winter Arts was in terms of engagement, there were over 24,000 individual interactions through the QR code filter (10,800 men, 13,900 women, 271 custom) over the two and a half week period. Public attendee numbers were also measured through downloads of the VMF app, which saw 2,621 new downloads between February 12-28th. Compared to the number of app downloads VMF receives from their well-established summer mural festival, Winter Arts saw a 1/3 of the number of app downloads, which is quite impressive for a brand new concept in its first year. Winter Arts gave people a safe way to enjoy downtown Vancouver in the winter and hopefully encouraged them to support local businesses while they were checking out the installations. Attracting people to public spaces that have been void of life was also a benefit to property owners and adjacent businesses. Winter Arts stayed active for 16 days, day and night, with minimal stewardship required. It was intended to be a self-guided art experience and has the potential to grow in the future with more partner locations and even more light activations that can compliment the AR pieces.

EXECUTION

After the partnership between the DVBIA and VMF was established, the DVBIA began identifying ideal public spaces and connected with property owners to gauge interest in being a host location. A project plan was developed and included a marketing and communications plan, a sponsorship deck for property owner and community partners, a call for artists, signage and wayfinding, and two new position postings at VMF – an AR curator and an indigenous curator. VMF managed the call for artists and once selected, the artwork began to be created for each confirmed public space location and the marketing materials and physical signage logistics were underway. The project was launched on time within a short timeframe. Both the AR artwork and the physical space markers were executed at a high-quality level and provided much needed interest to over 20 public space locations. The execution of VMF Winter Arts was highly successful and exceeded expectations as a safe way to animate public spaces and provide an experiential activity for people. The dispersed format for the installations worked out better than expected, encouraging people to explore the various locations and successfully avoided large groups or gatherings at one central location.

REPRESENTATION

All of VMF's artist curation is done with a focus on 50% minimum BIPOC, and 50% minimum female identified artists. Indigenous participation is a minimum 10-25% of the artist roster. For Winter Arts, there were 26 artists involved, which included 14 women, three LGBTQ+NB persons, two people with disabilities, three Black people, eight indigenous people, and five other people of colour. Artist curation was done by a guest curator, in this case Tom Kuo from Toronto. Additional investments were made in order to support indigenous artists operating on a platform as professional as experienced augmented reality artists. In addition to the DV BIA and VMF, Winter Arts involved six property owner sponsors who contributed funds and plaza locations for the installations. The Vancouver Pride Society also came on board to host two installations pieces. The public was involved in Winter Arts during the two and a half weeks and encouraged to spread out to discover all the AR installation locations and share their interactions on social media. The DV BIA was the presenting sponsor and also worked closely with VMF to design Winter Arts in a way that would safely respond to COVID19 restrictions. The DV BIA also identified suitable locations and assisted with securing property partners..

REPLICATION

Everything about VMF Winter Arts is highly replicable and can be an effective activation for other cities and districts both during a pandemic or when things get back to "normal." Bringing together artists and public spaces is the core requirement to be able to replicate VMF Winter Arts. The AR installations don't require a specific type of space, so they can be applied to a variety of streets or public spaces; however, a knowledgeable production team is needed to be able to execute the AR installations and manage the artist coordination. Specifically, our plan is to make this an annual event and be able to add physical art installations in addition to the AR pieces when restrictions are lifted. Due to COVID and physical distancing, we decided to only focus on AR artwork for this year. There is a strong potential for us to extend the duration of the VMF Winter Arts as well as the number of activation locations.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Augmented reality is a complex new technology, but with the right choices and communications strategy we were able to engage thousands of visitors. We did this in making a choice to use Spark AR (Facebook/Instagram integration) instead of using or creating a new app or platform. We did offer more instruction and information than may have been necessary, given this was a new concept, but in the end, in an attempt to thoroughly explain something new and fairly simple, it complicated it a bit. Next year, you'll see more art and less text on all of our installations. Fortunately, VMF has infrastructure and processes to follow which made kicking off a brand new idea in March feasible in a fairly short timeframe.