

## EDITORIAL

# Creative Institutions Must Treat Artist Labor as Scholarly and Cultural Infrastructure

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Creative institutions routinely describe artists as partners, innovators, or community voices. The language conveys respect but can obscure employment conditions. An artist may be invited to produce a commission, lead workshops, contribute to research, speak publicly, install work, manage participants, supply equipment, document outcomes, and grant reproduction rights under a single modest fee. Preparation and administration disappear into the category of opportunity.

The structural uncertainty of artistic careers is well documented. Not every creative project can offer long employment or substantial income. Institutions nevertheless control contracts, timelines, access, credit, and payment. They can decide whether risk is shared or transferred to the individual with least bargaining power.

Treating artist labor as infrastructure means recognizing that artistic knowledge supports recurring institutional functions. Artists contribute methods of observation, material experimentation, performance, interpretation, and public encounter. These are not decorative additions to research or education; they are forms of inquiry and cultural production.

Fair compensation begins with an accurate description of work. Calls and contracts should distinguish creation, research, rehearsal, meetings, travel, installation, public events, teaching, documentation, and reporting. If an institution requires insurance, equipment, software, assistants, or childcare arrangements, the budget should state whether those costs are covered. Preparation deserves payment even when it produces no visible object. Reading a collection, meeting a community, testing materials, or learning an access method may be central to qual-

ity. Payment schedules should include an initial installment so that artists do not finance institutional projects and should specify cancellation terms.

Accessibility is often discussed in relation to audiences while artists and cultural workers encounter inaccessible studios, stages, websites, schedules, and contracts. Institutions should ask about access requirements without forcing applicants to disclose unnecessary medical information. Budgets should treat interpretation, personal assistance, adapted equipment, rest, and flexible scheduling as project costs rather than deductions from the artist's fee.

Care responsibilities and geographic distance also shape participation. Early notice, remote meeting options, predictable hours, and travel support can widen access. Flexibility should not mean that artists remain constantly available; boundaries and response expectations should be clear.

Contracts sometimes request broad rights to reproduce, adapt, record, or sublicense work indefinitely. Institutions may need documentation and educational use, but these needs should be defined. Artists should retain rights not necessary for the project, receive credit in agreed forms, and know whether recordings will be commercialized, archived, or supplied to third parties.

Collaborative and community projects require particular care. The commissioned artist may not be able to grant unrestricted rights in contributions created by participants. Consent procedures, attribution, withdrawal limits, and safeguarding should be designed before documentation begins.

Credit should also describe labor accurately. Terms such as “facilitator,” “consultant,” “researcher,” “performer,” and

“co-creator” are not interchangeable. Contributor statements can make collaboration visible without collapsing distinct responsibilities.

Short projects can test ideas and respond to specific opportunities. An ecosystem composed only of short projects produces repeated onboarding, uncertainty, and loss of knowledge. Institutions should create multi-year residencies, recurring teaching roles, framework agreements, equipment access, archive relationships, and alumni networks that allow artists to build on earlier work.

Continuity does not require permanent employment for everyone. It requires routes through which relationships and knowledge persist. A residency might include follow-up access, a later public conversation, documented methods, or eligibility for development funds without a full new application. Organizations can share registers of fair opportunities while protecting personal data.

Banks's concept of creative justice directs attention to the conditions under which cultural value is produced and distributed. Institutions should report how project budgets are divided among artist fees, administration, production, marketing, and evaluation. Transparency allows missions to be compared with spending.

Artists should not have to prove that cultural work is real work every time an institution announces an opportunity. Fair fees, paid preparation, accessible conditions, rights clarity, transparent selection, and continuity are the infrastructure through which artistic inquiry becomes possible. Institutions that depend on artists also depend on the conditions that allow artists to remain in practice. Supporting those conditions is not generosity. It is responsible cultural governance.