

My Dearest Arts Organization, Are You Listening?

Article by Miko Lee and Jennifer Ridgway

Since the beginning of the pandemic, teaching artists have gathered in support of each other in closed calls, where they felt safe. In this environment, they shared: grief and painful experiences, worries and concerns, and dreams of returning to their artmaking in a just and equitable nation and world. What follows is a representational collage expressing an uncensored perspective in a letter to you. This letter is an invitation to widen your perspective about the teaching artist experience. We follow-up with a step-by-step checklist derived from the perspective of teaching artists as a guide to realize our shared goal to create a vibrant arts ecosystem that is equitable for all.

My Dearest, (insert your arts organization name here),

Through our collaboration, we've accomplished so much together. Even before you knew me, I knew you! Your reputation was stellar, you provided me with some security, and I so loved having your organization's name on my resume. You've always celebrated my talents and skills. Showing me off to your board and funders. I must admit I was confused when you made sure I went back for seconds at those wine and cheese events. I assumed you felt ashamed or guilty that you hadn't paid me for joining you at the event. I understood that you were in a difficult position, so I didn't make a big deal about it. Besides, it was so exciting when the funding was flowing our way, and you were very clear that I too would benefit from participating.

But during this pandemic, I have re-evaluated my needs and ambitions, and re-visited my plans to achieve them. I'm sure you have too. In the last eleven months, I've realized that we do not share the same values, that your organization

is only a perceived security for me, and your care for me is not as I thought.

I'm not sure you understand what I've been going through. Public acknowledgement of the dire situation that has befallen me and my teaching artist colleagues has not been forthcoming. When we meet on zoom, many of my friends are missing. They've left

for work that pays and it's not in the arts, which concerns me about the future of our field. Have you noticed their absence? Were you aware that some of our colleagues couldn't afford equipment, attend training without compensation, or have the bandwidth to adapt their lessons to virtual platforms?

I've thought about the trainings you offered me that I had attended



A teaching artist's personal development plan.

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before the pandemic, for which I wasn't paid or received only a small stipend. They helped me grow, but only in the ways that benefited you and helped you secure more wealth for your organization. I need full compensation to participate in your organization trainings, meetings, planning, reflection and travel. This is an issue for equitable and fair labor, as vital to the professionalism and sustainability of teaching artists as it is to your organization's staff.

You want my ideas, my artistry, my work and my skin tone to sell your product, but it doesn't translate to respect for me. For example, you call me in to take a photo in support of Black Lives Matter. This feels exploitative and hurts my heart.

As a teaching artist, my ideas—grounded in years of professional education, training, and experience in the field—are my currency. I know you well understand this, because I have heard and been part of intellectual property discussions and concerns expressed about others appropriating work from our collaboration. TA professionalism and sustainability itself is shortchanged, however, when our ideas, work, and documentation of our work in varied media is

signed over as the sole intellectual property of arts organizations with which we contractually relate.

As you know, I have shared my ideas willingly and freely, and worked hard for your arts organization, sometimes, neglecting my own self-care. I've held onto you through these difficult times longer than my colleagues because I had money saved (that is now depleted), my family is supporting me (which I have nearly exhausted), or I am undeniably privileged. It is antithetical for the teaching artist profession, being inherently about outreach and inclusion, to survive solely as a bastion of the privileged, however, and I trust that none of us want to reinforce such a dynamic. The TA field, certainly, cannot afford to associate with those content to do so.

Please understand I do not mean to hurt you. But the interdisciplinary breadth and experiential depth of

my practice helps to distinguish me as a professional with a unique and equally important viewpoint. I have a personal life, family and a business that needs my attention. The strength of my ambition, intellect, and imagination compels me to collaborate with those who will support my professionalism and sustainability.

I would like your support so that together we can rebuild and reinvent our nation and the community where we live and work, including in regard to teaching artists. I want to work this out with you, but you need help. Each time I've tried to bring these issues to your attention, you are quick to get defensive or judge, and are simply not open with me. Please reach out to an advocate for teaching artists for guidance so that you can work to build a vibrant, healthy, equitable relationship with me.

Love,
Your teaching artist



A visual teaching artist's virtual classroom and studio.

Please keep in mind these were perspectives commonly expressed in closed local meetings as part of a national TA listening tour. These meetings were hosted by associations and networks who are by and for teaching artists. They are vital to the field of teaching artistry. TAs need these private spaces to build unity and cohesion in a growing worldwide field, reaching across all artistic mediums and its many and varied sectors. These associations impact the individual teaching artist but also you—our arts partners—because teaching artists are growing stronger, wiser, and braver in their collaboration with you.

We invite you to join us in re-envisioning your relationship with teaching artists. Let's be a model for the nation of working together. As we pull ourselves out of the quagmire of multiple pandemics, how do we move forward as a field that honors pay equity as a social justice issue? Let us prioritize teaching artists who are at the very core of our work. We know you are committed to social justice. Work with us to address this equity issue. What steps will you take to repair, recreate and reimagine so that you recognize and value



Sample of average monthly pile of teaching artist receipts.

your diverse (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and disabled) teaching artists as paid professionals?

CALL TO ACTION

We call on you to take the actions on this step-by-step checklist. As you reflect, process and take action, reach out to the Teaching Artists Guild and other TA associations and networks in your region for further guidance and support. We believe we are united in support of teaching artists and are confident

in our collective resilience and social imagination. Together we will create an equitable and vibrant arts ecosystem.

Miko Lee is a theatre teaching artist that has been a part of the Teaching Artists Guild (TAG) collective for over a decade.

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CHECKLIST

A guide to strengthen your relationship with your teaching artists and sustain the entire arts ecosystem.

- Enlist TAs, staff and board who reflect the identities of your constituents and embody values of racial and social justice.
- Hire BIPOC leaders (*board, administrators, and TAs*)
- Add your organization to the TAG Asset Map to show you are part of the support network for teaching artists and promote the TAG Asset Map to your TA rosters
- Utilize the TAG Pay Rate Calculator to set your pay scale (*if you aren't able to meet the fee, provide a rationale and alternative compensation*)
- Bring TAs to the table and pay them for their expertise, time and energy:
 - Add TAs to your board (*sans financial responsibility*)
 - Include TAs in program development and assessment
- Write a TA job description that honors TA professionalism, promotes TA sustainability, and outlines expectations, including:
 - how to deal with any potential conflicts
 - how program assessment and 360 staff/TA evaluation will be conducted
 - what materials are provided by the organization and supplied by the TA for the assignment (*artistic tools and/or equipment for online teaching*)
 - how intellectual property will be handled to acknowledge and benefit TA creator (*especially in regard to digital assets*)
 - how the TA is credited for program and curriculum development
 - what professional benefits will be granted to TAs
- Make a donation to the TA associations/networks in your area