

# GAUGING the GREY AREA

## Standards for Artistic Labor

Artistic labor is often considered to be unquantifiable, difficult to define, or existing within a gift economy. At the same time, we live in the era of the “professional” artist, who is asked to be a hyper-performer, on the clock, giving all that they can for the promise of exposure. These assumptions about art-work have some positive aspects: a gift economy encourages collectivity and mutual exchange, while the professionalization of the arts presumably elevates the artist to a more respected role in society. The inability to achieve consensus about the status of the artist and the value of their labor has left artists in the position of the precarious worker, where they are expected to give, and to perform endlessly, without any standard for remuneration. Time for a change.

Use this quiz to gauge the grey area of your own artistic labor as opportunities arise. Though the variables in these kinds of decisions are too myriad to account for accurately, we hope this tool will be a starting place for navigating the difficult territory between a resounding yes and a resolute no.

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## RESULTS

**0-15 Dark and Stormy.** Take shelter. Leave this one alone. It may be tempting, but you have other priorities and in the end saying no here will leave space for a more fulfilling opportunity down the road. Saying yes here could perpetuate unfair conditions for others as well. You may even want to take the time to write a letter to let the people you would have been working with know your reasons for saying no, and what conditions would have made it a more mutually beneficial.

**15-30 Portland Winter.** This is feeling pretty gloomy, but there is the potential of a lush green spring to follow. Take time to reconsider the project and the relationship. Are there things you have not yet asked for that they might be able to offer that would sweeten the deal? Are there other resources that might be tapped if the project is framed differently? Could you propose to postpone the project so that you and the people/organization you are partnering with can look for additional resources and support for the project? Don't rush into this one, and be ready to walk away if there is no change in conditions.

**30-45 Bay Fog.** Visibility is low but there could be a beautiful vista behind the mist. Perhaps this is all just a matter of miscommunication, a call for more clarity, transparency, or strategy. It can feel awkward to talk about money and support, but ultimately if you don't speak up for yourself, or find an agent to speak on your behalf you won't get the most of this opportunity. Set up a face to face meeting and go into it assuming that more communication will benefit everyone. Be ready to show how the effort and resources you are requesting will strengthen the project and help you make something magnificent.

**45-60 Marine layer.** The sky is grey but its guaranteed to burn off by mid-day. Overall this looks like a great opportunity. There may be a few things lacking, but chances are you will walk away feeling good about the work you've done and the people you've worked with to pull it off. Continue to stay in good communication and let everyone involved know your limits. The freedom to realize your vision and the support to do it without burning out or going deep into debt will inevitably lead to more good things and stronger work in the future.

**60-75 April showers.** Such a beautiful shade of grey, a raincloud delivering resources for things to grow. Your work will thrive here. Keep the good communication strong by sharing your progress with those who are supporting you, and by sharing your gratitude and appreciation for their part in making your work shine. Consider writing a letter to the people you are working with to let them know how much it means to be given the resources to make great work and thrive as an artist.

### Question No. 1

Is this project creatively exciting to you and is it relevant to your current practice?

### Question No. 2

What is the potential financial gain/impact of this project?

### Question No. 3

How might my participation enable or constrain the ability of the commissioners to exploit artists?

### Question No. 4

What are the personal and financial risks?

### Question No. 5

What type of exposure will I receive?

## Acknowledgments

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## ADD IT UP

### Answer No. 1

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A=10  
B=5  
C=0  
D=15

### Answer No. 2

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A=5  
B=15  
C=0  
D=10

### Answer No. 3

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A=10  
B=5  
C=15  
D=0

### Answer No. 4

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A=5  
B=0  
C=10  
D=15

### Answer No. 5

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A =10  
B=5  
C=0  
D=15

TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_

Turn the page over  
to see your results

## ANSWERS

- No. 1**
- A. This idea is creatively exciting. It somewhat deviated from my current work, but I could make something new. I have affinity for the people involved.
  - B. I'm interested in this context and opportunity but it will take me away from my current practice. I could send in some old work.
  - C. I cringed when I saw the title for opportunity. My work has been misunderstood by the organizer. I would be embarrassed.
  - D. I've been waiting for this opportunity – and I'm excited about the ideas, the context, the audience, the other artists. It's as if I dreamt this.

- No. 2**
- A. A little. I get install support, they pick up, I get free drinks, and I get money *if* it sells.
  - B. STOKED. They are commissioning a new work and will pay for materials, fabrication, and are offering me a stipend.
  - C. NADA. I'm paying out of pocket for production, studio rent, transportation, and install to make an unsellable work.
  - D. They are paying an artist fee and shipping but I have to keep production costs down to make it work financially.

- No. 3**
- A. Initial conditions are suboptimal but negotiating could set a good precedent for individual and collective artist agency and/or future projects of their organization.
  - B. This opportunity is suboptimal for me but will help bring attention to the issue of exploitation.
  - C. This opportunity is so fair and so transparent that it benefits me *and* my community.
  - D. Even if I benefit (minimally) from this situation, I will be complicit in the system of artist exploitation.

- No. 4**
- A. I have misgivings about the presenter and context but there is financial support.
  - B. This opportunity involves going into debt, and will be detrimental to my relationships. Why am I even considering this?
  - C. I am excited about the possibilities opened up by this opportunity and I am reassured by the shared risk of the institution/collaborators.
  - D. I'm in a good position financially and personally, and I'm optimistic that the benefits of this opportunity will outweigh the risks.

- No. 5**
- A. The institution has resources dedicated to marketing but they don't seem reliable. They are well embedded in their local community, but opportunities for reach beyond that seem limited. Their PR strategy seems pretty generic and formulaic.
  - B. I really like the institution but I'll have to do most of the marketing myself. There's a postcard budget but no mailing list. The community the institution serves is limited.
  - C. I've never heard of the institution. I looked at their promotional materials and they were really badly designed. On the phone, the director was kind of a bitch. I'm not sure I want to be associated with them.
  - D. The institution has broad reach and an excellent reputation within the communities I'd like to connect with. It seems like my work will reach new audiences, too. I like the PR the institution has done in the past, and they usually get write-ups in the national press.