

***Gauging the Grey Area: Standards for Artistic Labor***  
**[DANCE-BASED ADDENDUM]**

*Created by Sarah Wilbur, 2014*

**QUESTION No. 1:** *Does this opportunity align with your creative strengths, experiences, and goals as a dance maker?*

A: This idea inspires me creatively to become involved. While its scope does not align perfectly with my experience/training, the invitation provides an occasion to research and learn from the organizers, context, and collaborating artists. I think that my collaborators would support me in the practice of translating my work within this context. [10]

B. I find this work interesting, but not well aligned with my present investments as a dance maker. The project of adapting my work may contort its general scope and intentions, and would require a great deal of rehearsal time for my dancers to learn and master the task at hand. I'm torn. [5]

C. I cringed when I saw the scope of this project. My values do not align with those of the presenting organization. I cannot participate in this project without a deep sense of personal conflict and a deep loss of time that I should be working on other things. My dancers/collaborators do not value this kind of work or approach. [0]

D. I'm eager to take advantage of this unique and exciting opportunity. The experience and working relationships are excellent and the support structures are strong. The timing and resourcing available for this opportunity converges with the availability of my closest artistic collaborators. It's as if I dreamt this. [15]

**QUESTION No. 2:** *What is the potential financial gain/impact of this project?*

A: MEAGER. I get a small performance honorarium, one free parking space, and reception food/drinks the night of the performance, and networking opportunities on the night of the performance. My dancers are left in the dust. [5]

B: STOKED. This commission includes space, designer fees, rehearsal and performance pay for the dancers, a design budget, and choreographic stipend. We are relatively well taken care of. [15]

C: NADA. I'm subsidizing the entire cost of rehearsing, designing, and producing this work, which is largely irreproducible due to the context of this production. [0]

D: INCOMENSURABLE. They are paying an artist fee that does not include many of the ancillary costs of this production. [10]

**QUESTION No. 3:** *How does my acceptance of this opportunity condition or constrain the future exploitation of dance artists by a sponsoring organization/institution?*

A: Production conditions are inadequate, but there is room to negotiate on behalf of myself and my collaborators, which could set a good precedent for future projects. This negotiation may benefit future artists in my area of the dance field who are interested in working with this sponsoring organization. [10]

B: This opportunity is suboptimal, but presents an opportunity to bring attention to the issue of exploitation by communicating areas of disconnect to members of this institution and to better contextualize the affiliated expenses at play in dance making. [5]

C: This opportunity is fair and transparent. It benefits all involved and sets an ethical standard for future dance-based collaborations in this type of production context. [15]

D: Even if I benefit (minimally) from this project, I will be complicit in the system of artist exploitation and will subject my collaborators to exploitive conditions. [0]

**QUESTION No. 4:** *What are the personal, financial, embodied, and relational risks and rewards of this project?*

A: There is financial support but a relatively high degree of risk via poor working conditions, low production values, insufficient time in the performance space, minimal publicity/exposure, and/or other heavy contingencies. [5]

B: This opportunity involves suboptimal conditions that pose physical hazards to my dancers and myself and cause us to incur debt or strain working relationships. Why am I even considering this? [0]

C: I am excited about the possibilities opened up by this opportunity and reassured by the institution's willingness to mitigate potential risks for all participants. [10]

D: This project puts me and my collaborators in a good position financially, physically, and professionally through heightened networking and exposure to new and important constituencies. I'm optimistic that the benefits outweigh the risks. [15]

**QUESTION No. 5:** *What kinds of communication labor does this project demand and how does this work affect the impact of my dance making?*

A: The project targets a narrow but committed constituency. There is little room for exposure beyond immediate participants and little budget or desire on the part of the presenting organization to reach beyond its current targets. But the quality of interaction is strong for those involved. [10]

B: The project marketing falls on my shoulders, with provisions made in terms of material fees but no access to a mailing list. This added time to fashion and distribute publicity takes time away from the creative labor of dancemaking and raises suspicion about the institutional rationale for presenting my project. [5]

C: The institution has minimal experience working with dance and little capital has been invested in contextualizing this work for potential audiences. Audience demand/interest is questionable, time and resources for promotion are insufficient, and the risk of misrepresentation for artists is, therefore, quite high. [0]

D: The institution has broad reach and an excellent reputation within the communities that I work or desire to connect with. Past publicity by the institution resonates with my own value systems, and the possibility of significant press exposure is high. [15]

## RATIONALE:

*\*(Addendum to No. 3) Here I account for the intermediary function of the choreographer as a frequent subcontractor of designers, performers, and third party collaborators as a significant distinction for dance and live performance. The risks to secondary and tertiary collaborators in dance contracting frequently fly under the radar if/when presenters do not know to look for these details (or when they feign ignorance, as the case may be). Conversely, sub-exploitation of dancers and support personnel by choreographers remains a relatively closeted discourse in dance.<sup>1</sup> To mitigate this, this question asks the negotiating dance artist to account for these sub-dependencies and interpersonal ethics.*

*\*(Addendum to No. 4) Time spent outside of the event and for adequate working conditions for performers are items of paramount importance in any booking situation in dance or live performance. The preparatory work of dance making costs time beyond the space of public presentation, and time in rehearsal does not generally equate with the **time on stage yield** of a particular work.<sup>2</sup>*

*\*(Addendum to No. 5) I substituted Helena and Lauren's concern with "exposure" here with "communication" to underline the mutual responsibility of all parties—to avow the fact that artists and presenters benefit differently (and differentially) from a particular production. Again, I think that the social practice of dance making demands a reciprocal exchange that suffers when this process gets collapsed into a "me" vs. "them" turf war. This suggestion of mutual responsibilities also underlines the reality that institutional agents conduct various levels of research during their pre-selection process. In my view, an invited artist should come clean and recognize when a reluctance to study the history of a presenting organization and the value systems at play in an institution's commissioning process stands in the way of a more productive collaboration. Here is where I appreciate W.A.G.E.'s charge to artists to research the history and culture of funding and presenting institutions as part of the production negotiation. The kind of critical literacy that W.A.G.E.<sup>3</sup> promotes trumps gut instincts by revealing deeper practical and material disjunctures that might evidence why an artist may or may not "like" a presenters approach.*

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Lakes's essay on the Authoritarian roots of Western Concert Dance stands as an exception in this regard. See: *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*. N. Jackson, T. Shapiro-Phim, eds. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008, p. 109-130.

<sup>2</sup> *Author's note:* The bolded letters in the latter sentence refer to a self-fashioned term invented (albeit facetiously) in the early 2000s with a colleague/collaborator Ben Munisteri to refer to a well-known and little-reported rehearsal circumstance in dance, wherein an artist and dancers work on a particularly thorny part of a dance for hours, **days** even, only to have the belabored moment last for very short amount of time in the resultant dance product. The audience, viewing the dance in performance, will never be aware of the hours spent to refine a particular choreographic moment or subsection. On the rehearsal side, Ben and I decided to jokingly institute the use of the term TOSY –**Time On Stage Yield**–with dancers at the start of a rehearsal to let them know **in advance** whether we anticipated the day's work to be low-yielding or high-yielding. By these temporal and physical 'standards', a dancer hearing our intention to work on a **low TOSY** section should put his thinking cap on and warm up, because the amount of repetition, adaptation, and confusion is likely to be high. In contrast, a **high TOSY** rehearsal could involve reviewing a large unison section with reliable timings, zero tactile contact, and simple spatial patterns. Different outcomes require different amounts of time, risk and corporeal preparation. Thus the disregard for the offstage time of dance making by commissioning or presenting institutions stands here as a potentially highly exploitive dimension of production negotiation.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wageforwork.com/resources/4/w.a.g.e.-survey-report-summary>