

## **Why Artists Die of Exposure**

By Beth Pickens

The tissue box in my office is within close reach of my clients, artists in every discipline living in Los Angeles who want something more or different for their practice. My clients are women, queer, trans, and artists of color - often an intersection of these experiences. They most frequently grab for the tissues when we talk about money. The shame, guilt, rage, and bewilderment about the impossibility of living and 'making it' financially is as palpable as it is common.

Several times a year I teach a two-day, six-hour personal finance workshop for artists and creative entrepreneurs. We excavate financial secrets, family histories, and cognitive behavioral responses to all things money. Participants nod gratefully as they hear their own stories, fears, and confusion reflected back at them. Why, they wonder, if they are working so hard, can't they seem to do better financially?

I knew from my feminist training - both on the ground and academic - that capitalism and economic disparity are urgent issues in contemporary feminist movements. Money doesn't guarantee happiness but it does buy choices; self-determination, I learned long ago, is a goal of feminism as a political movement. Gender and race are key mitigating factors in earning power in the US.

It wasn't until I worked fulltime in the arts that I understood how capitalism and the art economy were egregiously failing, even betraying, women - especially women of color. In 2017, the ratio of women's to men's median full-time earnings was 81.8 percent and black women earned 67.7 percent of white men's earnings.<sup>[1]</sup> Does this data ring true for my clients? You bet your bottom art dollar.

One concern is that my clients devote themselves to a sector that is devalued in the US. Being an artist is a weird job that doesn't have a clear promotional arc, transparency in wages, or specific tracks that lead to definitive forms of success, financial or otherwise. Artists will tell me they fear they are lazy. I uniformly reply that I don't know lazy artists because artists are unusual workers in that have an entire extra job, one they love and are committed to that may or may not pay. They frequently work many other jobs in order to support their ability to do this non-paying one. My clients' other jobs include: architect, teacher, wedding industry worker, bartender, grocery store clerk, sex worker, university professor, artists' assistant, gig worker, web and graphic designer, non profit staff, gallery worker, bookkeeper, and massage therapist. Like the majority of America, most have almost no savings.<sup>[2]</sup>

Artists are bombarded with familial, economic, and cultural messaging throughout their lives and training: *Art is a hobby, not a career. You need a backup (re: a real) job. Art works, unless paintings purchased by the ruling class, should be free and people won't pay for it. You should be grateful for exposure in lieu of cash. Rack up \$100,000 in student loan debt for that MFA that may lead nowhere. Live in an urban art center to grow your career and be priced out of four neighborhoods while working multiple jobs.*

Another concern is that my clients, already statistically earning a fraction of their male and/or white peer's wages, frequently receive little to no financial training from their families, in schools, or through the process of socialization. They have little negotiation practice, believe they will never have enough money anyway, and have internalized messages that their creative practice needs to or should be separate from economics. (That last message seems to be casually distributed in some MFA programs, from what my clients tell me.)

All of this adds up to some very familiar demographic results. One's gender and race will indicate their earning power, regardless of sector. All women and all genders of color are under-represented in both commercial and non-profit galleries.<sup>[3]</sup> Access to capital and knowing people with capital can powerfully position an emerging artist after graduating from art school. There is a clear financial feedback loop in art worlds but, though my clients critically think about and understand capitalism, some part of them often believes they could make money from their art practice if they were better or worked harder. It's clear, however, who is set up for success, for longevity, for never questioning their gender or racial identity's impact on opportunity.

What's a thinking feminist art worker to do?

### **1. Create transparency in compensation**

When workers know a pay standard or know what their peers make, then pay gaps can diminish. I encourage my clients to be transparent with their art communities about how much they ask for, how much they are offered, how much they receive in all kinds of arts transactions: sales, performances, commissions, museum shows, artist-run gallery events – all of it. What if male artists make public their payment and commissions? What if white artists advocate for artists of color, making certain their fees are equal?

### **2. Demand arts organizations become W.A.G.E. certified<sup>[4]</sup>**

New York City artists and curators<sup>[5]</sup> founded Working Artists and the Greater Economy as a means to address issues of art as labor and equitable, regulated pay across art worlds. W.A.G.E. creates pay scale recommendations for organizations of all budget sizes, created for the multiplicity of labor and activities artists provide to them. Organizations can voluntarily become certified and every artist can count on a minimum pay scale when they work with them. (White, heterosexual, cisgendered male artists are also at a disadvantage when a sector doesn't have clarity in pay scale.) What if every publicly-funded entity that presents living artists in the US were required to be W.A.G.E. certified or have a transparent pay scale?

### **3. Ask art funders to increase grant monies for free programming**

I write at least 300 grants a year for arts organizations and individual artists. I live and breathe the arts philanthropy and public funding landscapes. There is an economic paradox at work. Funders in California, for example, increasingly want free programming available to broad communities while still (rightly) requiring artists are

compensated but are not increasing their annual giving. *The math doesn't work.* What if funding entities that require free arts programming increase their giving in order to account for loss of earned income? When arts organizations reconcile these budgetary shortfalls, it's often artists getting stiffed.

#### **4. Understand that paying artists is a feminist issue**

We have to be critical of capitalism while still living within it. Rather than hate money, feel above or afraid of it, what if there could be pay equity in this sector? What if we frame art as labor and worthy of wages? What if art school students learn about negotiation, building a sustainable career, and personal finance? Let's acknowledge the gender and race pay gap in our art communities and do something about it.

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#### **Footnotes:**

1 <https://iwpr.org/publications/gender-wage-gap-2017-race-ethnicity/>

2 <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/13/how-much-americans-at-have-in-their-savings-accounts.html>

3 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-galleries-study-979049>

4 <https://wageforwork.com>

5 Art writers and curators face the same free labor/wage vagueness quandary as artists