

# COMMENSURATE WITH EXPERIENCE

Benjamin Akio Kimitch



Staff height chart from Performance Space 122. Photographed on Sunday, December 10, 2017 at 5:03 PM. Image courtesy the author.



DANIELLE

GAVIN

JESS

TANNER

GIULIA

SEAN LEO

DANIELLE

V.G.

KARL

SPAR

SAYA

DANIEL

BRY  
KENN

VINNY

BOUCE

SAM

CASSY

ALEX R.

CIRCUS

DANIEL

CIRCUS

CIRCUS

CLORZ

LESLIE

DEREK

VINNY

BEVIN

LAUREN

ALEX R.

CIRCUS

CLORZ

It's no coincidence that every administrative arts worker I know is burnt out. We're constantly swapping job postings seeking greener pastures, but we also commiserate knowing every institution is a cycle of similar problems. We're trapped. There's never enough staff, always too many projects, everything is "ambitious," never enough time, artists are poorly paid, and so too are the staff. We all know how hard and underpaid the work is, but we want to make our own contributions to the community that inspires us, so when we imagine making a change, our dreams are generally about the devil we know.

For purposes of this article, I am focusing on my work experiences in specific "institutions" whose non-profit operations center around the public presentation of dance and movement-based arts. These spaces typically engage many different artists and companies each year, in small-to-midsized brick-and-mortar spaces in New York City, and by extension, an urban context. This sector of institutions operates under distinct conditions. Too often, critical discourse around these institutions conflates them with galleries and museums, eliding key aspects of how movement-based organizations are funded, staffed, and wield cultural power.

Something that isn't talked about enough, if at all, is how artists and the administrators they encounter at institutions have more in common than either cares to admit. And this goes deeper than the overlooked fact that the vast majority of administrators are actually artists. Questions about the wellbeing of the salaried administrators are not prioritized in today's institutional critique; and these conversations are increasingly urgent as Black, Indigenous, and people of color become better represented on institutional staffs. Does the executive assistant make enough money to buy lunch? What is the state of the social media associate's mental health after the PR fallout on Twitter? Are there consequences when a box office worker is attacked by an established artist who's picking up their comp tickets from the director? Does the technician have access to trauma support after being the target of an abusive artist? It is a curious arrangement where the artists who work within the institution largely suffer at the hands of featured artists or those at the top. My own work history has taken me through a number of institutions in New York. When I look at them together, I realize I have had the good fortune to see many of the shared concerns and problems of these institutions, as well as their attempts at change, played out in various ways. Now, as our field begins to rebuild for a post-pandemic chapter, I question our deeper relations that still go largely overlooked as artists and institutions make plans to return, reopen, or even dismantle.

My first full-time job was at Dance Theater Workshop, an institution founded by artists Art Bauman, Jeff Duncan, and Jack Moore in 1965. My title was community liaison/programming assistant, a combined role devised after a wave of devastating staff layoffs in the wake of the 2008 recession and DTW's tremendously increased operating costs for its new building built by its previous reigning director, David White. My hours were a strict 9am–5pm, Monday through Friday. I was lobby receptionist, building security, phone operator, dance studio rentals manager (swept the floors daily, checked-in renters, bookkeeping), artistic director's assistant (booked meetings and travel itineraries, reconciled expenses), and I coordinated a variety of education and residency activities. My desk was isolated in the street-level

entrance, so one of my supervisors, Gretchen Weber, relieved my post daily for lunch and whenever I needed to use the bathroom.

The juggle of responsibilities was by no means sustainable for any party. As for me, I was reliant on the \$30k salary and thankful for the paycheck-to-paycheck stability. With a Dance BFA degree in hand, this job was my survival career. Survival jobs for artists typically have flexible hours, but I found working full-time to be a practical means of survival especially when competitive choreography opportunities to showcase my work paid only \$125. Through my employment at DTW, I felt part of a community of dance artists, including other DTW admin co-workers who themselves were mostly artists, and the Movement Research artist-admin staff who, at the time, rented office space at DTW. I was witness to the rich, daily activity in our downtown dance community. I was witness to how an institution could provide established and reliable meaning and service for a community.

In the day-to-day business of the dance community, I have always been perplexed by an established separation of *artist*, *audience*, and *institution*. Inside and outside institutional walls, I see these three categories regularly tiered and dramatized in mission statements, artist statements, fundraising, marketing, and institutional critique. To my eye, it is essentially the same people engaging across these identities. I myself am both an independent artist and institutional full-time arts administrator (who has always been in positions that interface directly with artists and is tasked with attending their engagements), so I exist porously across and in-between these spaces. The escalating artist-versus-institution tension is an especially curious dynamic when you consider the survey of long-standing institutions that were founded and continue to be staffed by artists: The Kitchen, Performance Space 122 (now Performance Space New York), Danspace Project, The Joyce Theater, Movement Research, Shakespeare Workshop (now The Public Theater), Dance Theater Workshop (now New York Live Arts), Chen Dance Center, and HERE. Furthermore, when I consider the current number of artists still holding institutional leadership positions at spaces ranging from JACK to New York City Center, I would say the enshrined artist-led institution is very much alive today. There is no denying that boards and the business models of the non-profit have usurped much of the early artist-run energy of these spaces—but to propose, as some have, that the most radical thing we could do is hand institutional control over to artists or dismantle institutions altogether so that artists can build something new for themselves, is historically shortsighted, to say the least.

In 2011, I was on the DTW staff when the institution merged with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company to form the new entity New York Live Arts—the official merger tagline was "Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and Dance Theater Workshop Reimagined"—a business initiative authored by the DTW and BTJ/AZ board of directors, in which Bill became Live Arts' executive artistic director and Carla Peterson of DTW was appointed artistic director, a title she held at DTW and fought to retain. Jean Davidson from BTJ/AZ became Live Arts' chief executive officer. A widespread and negative outcry from the dance community about the erasure of the name "Dance Theater Workshop" (anticipating a somewhat similar public lament in changeover of "Performance Space 122" to "Performance Space New

York” in 2018) spoke to more than a rear-guard mourning the loss of a familiar dance venue. It directly echoed artists’ relationship to DTW as an artist-run institution that fostered singular values and spirit. Live Arts was an institution built toward financial stability, ambition, and experimentation with the institutional form. Interestingly, the merger, conducted with an eye on saving DTW’s Chelsea real estate, was viewed in tension with DTW’s commitment to artistic experimentation. Critics of the merger also saw Bill—a Black, gay, accomplished artist seemingly aligned with DTW’s storied, artist-run past—as an incoming leader who was too much of an institution in and of himself. It should be noted that the administrative staff that first ran Live Arts was predominantly artists and former artists, and this remains true of Live Arts today. There was Jean, CEO and former lighting designer for Yo-Yo Ma; Bill Wagner, CFO and former Mark Morris dancer; Megan Sprenger, director of marketing and PR and choreographer; Chloe Brown, director of production and lighting designer; Marya Wethers, program manager and dancer; and the list goes on... Liliana, Adam, Leah, Tyler, Jaamil, Ryan, Gretchen, Vinny, JJ, Meredith, Sarah, Tara, Ella, Alyssa, and many others. Carla formerly had an artistic practice and early-on became dedicated to supporting other artists in the experimental performance field. Choreographer Reggie Wilson recently recalled to me a time when Carla—the-freelancer was downtown dance’s go-to videographer. In her notable leadership roles, she famously was (and continues to be) a compassionate champion of artists’ needs, and operated at DTW and Live Arts with remarkable big-picture fluency in how institutional power and resources could be balanced and focused towards that end. I was Carla’s assistant and she was my first institutional boss. Her values directly laid my own foundation for visioning institutional work.

In the early months of the Live Arts merger, I was promoted within the programming department, embedded into staff office culture, and physically resituated from my isolated position in the first-floor lobby. Now, I bore witness to the daily growing pains of the merger’s internal workings, which revealed institutional displays of power, hubris, and culture-clashing between the two camps. The institution expanded very fast, and just as quickly began to be characterized by staff turnover at every level, a few layoffs, and frequent restructuring, which contributed to the already peak levels of exhaustion, low morale, and emotional precariousness in the office. In 2014, Carla left to accept the directorship at the Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography in Tallahassee, FL. Live Arts’ producing director Michael Lonergan left shortly after to return to the Park Avenue Armory, and a few months later he poached me to join him.

My full-time institutional work continued at the Park Avenue Armory as their production coordinator, with additional responsibilities to assist the artistic director Alex Poots when he traveled to New York from his second salaried job at Manchester International Festival. At the Armory, everything both physically and emotionally manifested at unimaginable scale, all guided by a surprisingly grassroots artists-first, can-do (more accurately, must-do) ethos. Staff bonds grew stronger after every production, having successfully survived unimaginable circumstances. But staff turnover was frequent. Echoing the pervading scarcity model in the field, the Armory was no different despite its scale. They were severely understaffed for the work and

pace required, so eventually my highs from accomplishing the impossible were replaced by deep exhaustion and a few isolated late-night anxiety attacks. All said, I cherish my lessons, memories, and colleagues from this time. I’m proud of my work and have enormous respect for what the team continues to accomplish there. But at the time, it wasn’t sustainable for me.

When I interviewed for a job at Performance Space 122, my Armory schedule was so relentless that I couldn’t meet in-person, so I interviewed over Skype in a hidden back-corner of the Armory’s Drill Hall. I was hired by Performance Space 122 as a producer in late 2015 and I took a substantial pay-cut in exchange for the company-culture and the opportunity for a different kind of professional growth. At that time, Performance Space was in its fourth year operating outside its East Village brick-and-mortar home in 122 Community Center—a building that also houses four other organizations—which was undergoing a substantially prolonged \$35-million city-funded and contracted construction and renovation. My workplace orientation was at a bar near their temporary office loft in Greenpoint, where at a staff “beer o’clock” I met the small team led by its artistic director of ten years, Vallejo Gantner, and managing director, Winnie Fung—a family of big personalities most of whom had long histories with the institution and unanimous allegiance to PS122’s past. Performance Space 122 was started in the late 1970’s by artists Charles Dennis, Charles Moulton, Tim Miller, and Peter Rose, with historically undervalued contributions from Stephanie Skura. Mark Russell was hired as PS122’s first director in 1983 and paid \$7,000 for the year to formally incorporate the institution and formalize fundraising and programming efforts. He held that position for over two-decades until the board ousted him from the post.

At the end of 2016, following Vallejo’s tenure, Jenny Schlenzka was hired as the institution’s new executive artistic director, a role the board designed to combine executive director and artistic director responsibilities into one person. Jenny is notably the first woman artistic director in the institution’s four-decade history. Her curation, in spite of her critics, honored PS122’s performance history and charted new territory with remarkable equity and representation. Women, Black, Brown, Indigenous, trans, lesbian, and queer artists, and local communities historically overlooked by the institution made up every program, and never assumed one templated approach across projects. I was incredibly proud to work on these seasons with Jenny. As senior producer, I followed suit in these values through individualized financial and artistic support for every project, informed in great part by my experiences and temperament as an active working artist myself.

As representation and programming picked up pace, financial realities kept the staff size extremely lean. Staff position turnover and vacancies became frequent as exhaustion set in from construction delays on Performance Space’s theaters, and later due to the inevitable growing pains of new leadership and the hustle of rebooting the institution in its new spaces. The renovation of 122 Community Center, which houses Performance Space’s theaters and offices, took over three times longer than the promised two-year construction timeline. My first years with Performance Space were spent producing artists outside of its brick-and-mortar building, while managing, month-after-month, construction delays on the new building and a full future season of

artists expecting to be presented in it. By the time these artists' works finally premiered in the new Performance Space theaters in 2018, the staff was 100% different from the one the artists first met when Vallejo invited them. With two different artistic directors and the same backlog of patient artists, I navigated the culture of how an institution communicates uncertainty with its artists and also my own agency within the hierarchy of that decision making. It's a mode of working that eerily anticipated the Covid-19 pandemic.

Often renovations are necessary steps towards safety and accessibility, but the pace of arts space creation and renewal suggests the funding available for architectural expansion—the sparkle and tangible sense of accomplishment that directors, board, donors, and funders can galvanize around—exceeds this need. It's a balance, though currently an alarming imbalance that ignores the basic needs of the people that make up a cultural community and inhabit the buildings themselves. In the mission to support artists, the parade of new buildings can feel like an empty gesture when seasonal unemployment is precedent among artists even pre-pandemic. Do these expanded brick-and-mortar spaces, and in many instances wholly new institutions, offer something new, better, or more of the same? At the onset of the pandemic and the city-wide shutdown in 2020, it was interesting to observe how institutions across the field reckoned with their identity and values without their buildings. The rug was pulled out from under an industry that was capitalizing on space.

Only recently at institutions has there been a noticeable, explicit shift in addressing equity and diversity of artistic programming. Increasingly, funding and relevance are contingent on it. This course correction by historically white-led institutions often means engaging with artists and organizers historically overlooked or barred access to the institution, many of whom come with lived experiences different from the predominantly white, middle-class contingent that informed how most institutions are currently structured and resourced. Beyond the arts institution, greater institutional systems continue to fail marginalized individual artists, so the scarcely-resourced arts institution often becomes the container in which many of these artists unpack sprawling systemic injustices of a world conditioned by capitalism. These attempts at institutional change reverberate through the workers who actually have to put this change into action, but simultaneously are not provided the professional training, agency, support, or resources necessary to mediate the exchanges that arise from working with people who are invited to disrupt and challenge status quo. This is not true of all artists, but the rage and grief that drives a lot of radical politics is often directed aggressively and repeatedly at the arts workers on the ground in part-time, entry-, or managerial-level positions who are tasked with facilitating or executing the artist's work. These workers often hold less power or influence than the artists themselves. The boundaries are grayed, and when staff are confronted with this charged work environment, it's common to be told by directors to not take it personally, or the abuse is justified as an artistic project.

In a grand gesture to mark “forty years of existence,” Performance Space invited a cohort of artists to run the institution for the year 2020. The idea began sometime in 2018 with Jenny and artist Sarah Michelson and out of an earnest curiosity to re-template the institution with a nod

to Performance Space's artist-run origins. Deputy director Pati Hertling and I later came on board to help brainstorm the early accountability systems and timeline for beginning this project.

The process of imagining the scope and need for the project formally began in early 2019 in a three-day private think tank of eleven artists, facilitated by Sarah. Also present were select artists from within Performance Space: board members Ishmael Houston-Jones and Kaneza Schaal, and myself. Sarah and I first worked together in 2015 when I participated in *Dance & Process* at The Kitchen, and I was inspired by the way she challenges default structures, both in the practice of singular artists and in the enactment of field-wide systems. At Performance Space, she knew me intimately as someone who held, in equal parts, an identity as an independent artist and institutional administrator. With the acknowledgement that I might offer some necessary insight to the workings of the organization, I was the only Performance Space staff member invited to participate in the think tank.

What began as a sincere visioning process was later handed over, as planned, to an invited group of artists—“the cohort”—who were given tangible assets of keys, wages, desks, and full agency of the 2020 programs budget and activities. By design, Sarah was not part of the cohort, but stayed on as a part-time “ecologist,” an evolving, undefined role that desired to bridge the staff and cohort experiences. However, the cohort quickly took on a life of its own. Professional mediation was modestly budgeted, but it was never prioritized by the cohort or other powers that could enact it. Orientations with cohort and staff began in October 2019, and as the project unfolded, I watched the most vocal members of the cohort fall comfortably into their new positions of power. The cohort's artist-identities protected them from accountability and existing norms of workplace conduct and respect. Certain members of the cohort spoke of undoing hierarchies, but in practice indictments were handed down that reaffirmed the division between the artists' agenda and what they believed the workers in the institution represented. The Performance Space staff were regularly manipulated to believe they were serving a superior moral high ground, despite having never been asked to be a part of the project or properly oriented to it. There was little real consideration for the wellbeing of the other inhabitants of 122 Community Center or the Performance Space staff who were all still under employment contract to show up daily without exception. Staff were frequently left out of planning conversations and were instructed by some cohort artists to be hands-off in previously collaborative aspects of their jobs, but still made to execute base-level administrative labor and space maintenance on the cohort's behalf. In their effort to reimagine institutional power, the cohort created a new, more elusive, repressive hierarchy. In late February 2020, I resigned from Performance Space. After almost five years, I was leaving an institution that had undergone total change: new directors, a completely new full-time staff, a new name, and a new building.

I started working at Danspace Project in April 2020 with the administrative title of Program Director and Associate Curator. Founded in 1974 by artists Barbara Dilley, Mary Overlie, and Larry Fagin, Danspace is a small institution where, from 2011–2017, I cultivated my identity as a professional artist. Danspace's staff retention is pretty remarkable and the institution, in many ways, survives on

commitments to non-profit systems that the 2020 artist cohort at Performance Space was rejecting in its takeover. It's a small full-time staff of nine, predominantly artists—Jodi, Judy, Lily, Nora, Peggy, Seta, Sev, Yolanda, and me. The institution's small size and collaborative company-culture has in large part enabled it to be responsive and reactive to the effects of the pandemic.

As part of my job, I am now regularly on Zoom calls with directors and leadership from other local and national dance presenting institutions addressing the pandemic. The increase in online gatherings during the pandemic has meant a beautiful—I would even venture to say unprecedented—frequency and deep level of knowledge sharing and collaborative thinking amongst institutional players. At the beginning of the global shut down, “reopening” was an agenda focal-point for the directors of these majority brick-and-mortar institutions. A few months in, when a lot more was known about the lasting effects of Covid-19 and the looming winter uptick, the continued focus on reopening started to feel like a predictable, perhaps comfortable distraction from engaging in deeper reflection or visioning for a better dance field. When visioning did take place, it was usually in obvious frameworks like whether online programming would continue when institutions “returned.” The summer and early fall shifted to a crisis-response of revamped institutional value statements and undergoing anti-racism training. This was also a time when staff furloughs and layoffs took place across some institutions.

When I began writing this piece in January 2021, reopening had returned as the major focus. I attribute this in large part to three recent events. The first being the introduction of New York City's Open Culture legislation which enables entities to self-produce and monetize outdoor street events through an expedited city permitting process. The second was a talk on January 9, 2021, titled *Public Health and Re-Opening the Live Performing Arts*, in which Dr. Anthony Fauci named fall 2021 as a plausible timeline for the public reopening of theater venues. Fauci's talk was hosted by The Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP), a membership-driven institution whose mission fuels a performing arts economy through professionalized booking and touring. The third is Governor Andrew Cuomo's announcement of its NY PopsUp festival, the state's celebrity-headlined arts revitalization plan via pop-up performances. These events have their merits, but all three look at reopening from a set of conservative, status-quo values for what art, artists, public, and process look like post-pandemic. There are fundamental considerations that are missing, such as the mental and physical readiness of dancers or the migration of unemployed production technicians out of New York City. Particularly in the case of NY PopsUp, inventing and financing a wholly new festival infrastructure is counter to the real needs of the industry. It is explicitly about revitalizing the spirit of the non-artist public, not the spirit or pockets of arts workers or the existing, struggling institutions whose missions historically support them, especially long underfunded Black companies. In March, a month after the NY PopsUp announcement, Governor Cuomo authorized the reopening of event, arts and entertainment venues. Audiences are now invited to return to venues, but what are the needs of the invisibilized workers who will be producing these efforts with a fraction of the workforce and heightened, untried procedures? Has time expired

to consider the deeper workings of artistic creation, staff wellbeing, and ecology?

The desire for change reverberates through all of us who together create, perform, fundraise, amplify, administer, buy tickets, and donate money. We were exhausted and divided before the pandemic and it has only become more compounded during our current crises. We won't address the root of our field's division by rolling out festivals, buildings, or performative gestures of change. There is a potential other kind of institution-making happening all the time in the relations among those who create together at these spaces. I hope there is still time for us to slow down. To acknowledge what we share. To care for each other.

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Benjamin Akio Kimitch is a dance artist and producer living in Brooklyn. He is currently the Program Director and Associate Curator at Danspace Project. He is also a Movement Research Artist-in-Residence. His next commissioned project will premiere at The Shed in New York in 2022.