

HELLO THERE, BROOKLYN COMMUNE (JUNIOR COMMITTEE BLOG)

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Hello There, Brooklyn Commune (Junior Committee Blog)

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Sunday September 22nd, Hollis Bartlett and Alexander Thompson (Dance/NYC Junior Committee's Chair and Vice-Chair) attended the fourth general meeting of the Brooklyn Commune. [The Brooklyn Commune Project](#) is a grassroots initiative organized by [Culturebot](#) and [The Invisible Dog Art Center](#) to educate, activate and unify performing artists of all disciplines to work together towards a more equitable, just and sustainable arts ecology in America. The afternoon began with a presentation by Andrew Simonet, former co-director of [Headlong Dance Theater](#) in Philadelphia, titled "Why Artists Are Poor and Why They Shouldn't Be". In addition to his work with Headlong, Andrew has worked extensively with [Creative Capital](#)'s Professional Development Program as well as founding his own Professional Development Program for artist in Philadelphia called [Artists U](#). He spoke to a number of common challenges that artists face, perhaps most important of which is compensation.

- Andrew compared artists to scientists; categorizing the function of both groups as researchers.
 - the artistic method is very similar to the scientific method: there is an idea, which gets explored and then the result is shared
 - failures are just as important to share as successes

Hollis: If we follow Andrew's analogy, then performing artists should think of their projects as research. Researchers need access to resources, collaborators, labs, administrative support etc. How can artists secure those elements for themselves?

Alexander: It's interesting to think about art as research, and there are definitely some interesting parallels, but I think the comparison comes from a place of needing to legitimize art by comparing it to something that people already explicitly value.

Hollis: I completely agree, there isn't unanimous support for the arts in our society. Artists are constantly having to be defensive and ultimately this takes their attention away from their Art.

Alexander: What do we need to do to make the case for art as a rigorous, impactful, vital part of our societal fabric so that we don't need to compare it to other fields in order to legitimize it?

"First thing we need to do," Andrew said, "is to figure out our personal finances so we can focus on our Art."

- Keep track of your credit score; it is important
- Own real-estate; it's a smart investment
- Find out where your money is going: write down everything you buy in a week, evaluate, and then make some adjustments
- How much do you need to earn a year? There is an amount that is enough. Divide that number by 1500 (roughly the number of working hours per year) to get your hourly rate, which you can use to get your daily and weekly rates.

Hollis: Those last two bullets are great self-advocacy tools to identify your value and needs. This year JComm has taken a few initial steps to document our value. At our October meeting, we began tracking the hours members contribute to the committee; both as a record of professional development individually and to quantify JComm's service to the dance community in NYC.

Alexander: This can be applied to a creative practice as well; dancers working for free can keep track of hours worked so that there is a record of service provided. This can help with long term planning. At the beginning of the talk Andrew showed us three pie charts of where his income was coming from 1995-2008. The portion of his income that was coming from his artistic practice grew steadily through that 13 year period. Keeping tabs on this information for yourself can help you track your progress and plan strategically. I also just want to point out that owning a home in Philadelphia (where Andrew lives) is much more feasible than it is in New York.

Andrew encourages Artists to "stop being beggars and start stepping up as partners".

- Outline your priorities and work with individuals/organizations that share or allow them
- Everyone negotiates, artists should too. Its important to separate your excitement for the project from your realistic financial needs.
 - model: "I'm really excited about this aspect of project x, and here is what will make it possible for me..."
- Focus on Art's role in society and let the effect happen. It's trendy to advocate for the arts in terms of economic impact or educational benefits, but we must understand that these are the effects, not the role, of the Arts.

Alexander: That last bullet point is really big for me.

Hollis: I've been told that the way to advocate for the arts is by pushing these effects (economic, educational, etc.). And like the artist/scientist analogy, this is another tool to legitimize art. But it's frustrating that we have to fight to legitimize art.

I recently came across this quote from Stanton Welch of Houston Ballet: "If you look back at the great empires of the world – the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Chinese – their greatness is reflected in their art. It captures the essence of that area. It's like leaving a footprint." American artists are lacking the support to leave a substantial footprint. I would like to see public opinion progress forward to the understanding that the arts are not only valuable but essential to our society.

Alexander: I think that, in general, people would agree that the arts are important. The question is one of public funding for the arts. In order to make work, artists and arts organizations are forced to run the gauntlet of private and foundation funding, most of which won't solely fund operational expenses. If public funding was able to underwrite the infrastructure necessary to make art happen then artists and organizations could focus on the important work of creating art that is impactful, exuberant, and transformational. The reality is that artists are scrappy and

resilient and able to adapt to challenging circumstances, and we will continue to create work in less-than-ideal circumstances if resources aren't provided, because we need to. Because we have no choice. The real question is whether the United States can fundamentally shift our value system to reward more than just those things that generate profit; whether we can collectively come to value generosity, creativity, empathy, curiosity, honesty, courage, ecstasy, melancholy, and all the other beautiful things that human beings are capable of. If we can do that, we'll be alright.

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