



Educating Allies and
Empowering Artists
in Carceral Spaces



About Art + Agency:

The conversation began during a roundtable at Justice Arts Coalition's (JAC) 2021 National Convening: Art for a New Future. Since then, the Art + Agency team was formed and has been diligently working to keep the dialogue going. Art + Agency centers the experiences and leadership of artists with lived experience of incarceration in developing guiding principles intended to become the standard to which organizations, institutions, and individuals that exhibit, sell, and/or publish creative work by systems-impacted individuals hold themselves accountable.

The facilitation of this process has been led by JAC partners Kamisha Thomas and Aimee Wissman, Co-Founders of the Returning Artists Guild (RAG) and Page Dukes of Mourning Our Losses. Over the past six months, they have been in regular correspondence with a working group of artists who are or have been incarcerated, collecting the artists' feedback through a series of surveys and interviews. Each Working Group member has had opportunities to both share their own experiences and reflect on the experiences shared by their colleagues. The members of the Working Group are:

- Carole Alden (UT)**
- Brett Gonzalez (TX)**
- Spoon Jackson (CA)**
- EJ Joyner (GA)**
- William B. Livingston III (OK)**
- Kenneth Reams (AR)**
- Carla Joan Simmons (GA)**



JUSTICE
ARTS
COALITION

rag
Returning Artists Guild

Mourning
Our
Losses

ART FOR
JUSTICE
FUND



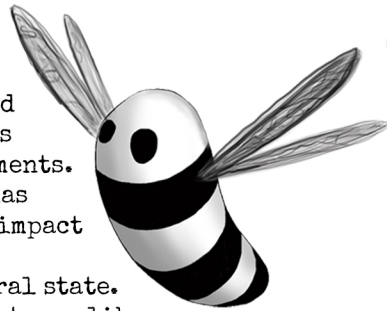
**Art + Agency is a collaboration between
Justice Arts Coalition, Returning Artists Guild,
and Mourning Our Losses with support from the Art for Justice Fund**

This guide was informed and inspired by the collective wisdom of the Working Group and leadership team. It is not a final product. Abolition of the carceral state is the future we believe in and strive toward. We are a group of artists, both “inside” and “outside,” who came together to brainstorm, research, reflect, and search for consensus through a collaboration between JAC and RAG with support from the Art for Justice Fund. These are not laws, rules, or even guaranteed best practices. However, as directly impacted people, we are the experts in the room and we know that the best way to extend the impact and healing work of the arts inside carceral spaces is through supporting, uplifting, and empowering the artists who live and work there.

Before we begin, a note about language...

We understand that people who have been impacted by the carceral system have been othered by certain words, labels, or terms from carceral and legal environments. Every directly impacted artist has the opportunity to consider the impact of, and their preference for, the language and labels of the carceral state.

To that end, most of us agree that terms like “inmate” or “offender,” are dehumanizing because they equate a person with their circumstance, not who they are. Labels like “prison art/artist” conflate creative subject matter with the artist’s physical location. At the same time, many artists have found it helpful to leverage certain labels and experiences to get the exposure, recognition, and opportunities necessary to create change, support causes, and share their stories. Ultimately, it is a personal decision but



using person-first language like “artists who are incarcerated” is usually the best choice. Members of the Working Group also use “currently/formerly incarcerated,” “justice-impacted,” “justice system survivors,” “artists who are incarcerated,” “inside” and “outside,” to be explicit and direct without being harmful.

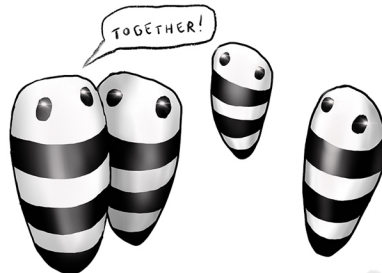
The following **Guiding Principles and Artists' Credo** are investigative of some "standard" practices and are aspirational in their intention to ethically collaborate with, recognize, and compensate artists in the face of institutional rules that will often require you to violate the most basic human rights and needs and are aimed at making you complicit in dehumanization.

We acknowledge the iterative nature of abolition and while this is not a complete message, it is a direct one. We invite you to listen, receive, imagine, and then apply the calls to action and creation embedded within.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ARTIST PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

The carceral environment strips human beings from their autonomy over any aspect of their lives except their imagination and creativity. The carceral environment is not designed for creative practice or human relationships and thus, these are the most important elements of healing for people who are incarcerated. Relationships create opportunities to hold space for another human's dignity and support their aliveness and creative practice and healing; highlighting what cannot be otherwise expressed, explored, or released.

Many organizations, volunteers, agents, publishers, curators, producers, educators, and teaching artists have good intentions when they think about ways in which they might share, sell, or support the work of artists inside, but there are real barriers and blind spots that turn good ideas into exploitative practices. The exploitation of the creative labor of incarcerated artists adds another layer of psychological and financial trauma to the carceral experience.



To hold up ethical practices in the oppressive and immoral carceral system is not an easy task. Before going inside an institution or contacting an artist in prison, consider the potential benefits and challenges of partnerships with institutions versus those with incarcerated people themselves, as the rules of engagement are very different. As a volunteer with the artist's best interests at heart, you will discover that some of the most ethical or beneficial practices violate the institution's rules. Before you enter, do some research, talk to other folks who are familiar with the institution, and find the resources you might need to support your work.

The following guiding principles are meant to create a framework to consider in your current work or new initiatives. They are the result of the shared experience and labor of incarcerated artists, writers, performers, and multidisciplinary practitioners and these guidelines are meant to apply to artists working in all genres/media. Until abolition is realized, these guiding principles are a starting point for (You) to partner with artists and/or institutions in a meaningful, ethical, and practical way.

- Successful programs/ongoing projects **have an empathetic administrator/liason** within the institution's administration to support access to and participation in art programs and to get supplies into institutions for creative practice.
- (You) **learn the rules and regulations** of a particular institution about art supplies and maker space access policies, how artwork is released from and returned to the prison, the rules of communication, and the rules of financial transactions.



Volunteer training provided by institutions is always based in racist, sexist, and dehumanizing ideology that is meant to deter volunteers from creating the kinds of meaningful connection and opportunities that support the growth and reentry of incarcerated people. Buyer beware.

- (You) **communicate openly, frequently, and be willing to cover the expenses** (phone calls, postage, email, etc.) of communication. Communication creates trust, and your strategy will vary depending on your status with the institution and the artist, but your communication needs to be honest and consistent.

Don't talk down to people who are incarcerated. Don't assume you know anything about their education, background, or lived experience.

Do remember that we all share the same feelings and needs, we all want to contribute, and we are all interconnected. By allowing yourself to recognize the humanness in others, it creates empathy and validates the connection between you and the artist.

- (You) **invest in artists** through a pay structure that includes professional development and access to resources, skills, and opportunities. Professional and personal development is critical to the growth and long-term success of any artist.



- (You) **center artists in the planning process** for the events, programs, and initiatives that you ask them to participate in. To center an artist means to value their lived experience, respect their ability to ideate and contribute in ways you have not yet imagined, and to honor their autonomy as creative leaders who can design and execute their own creative outputs.

- (You) **support the artist's autonomy over their own narrative.**

(You) understand the impact of harmful language and agree to discuss and support the artist's decision about how they want to be referenced and what part (if any) of their story you can share.

- (You) assume the burden of proof! **Artists deserve thoughtful documentation of their work** in your event, gallery, publication, etc. Without your documentation they have no opportunity to build a portfolio (a key component to applying for funding and exhibition opportunities). Documentation is the difference between work that sells and work that is lost, stolen, misused, or otherwise disappeared without documentation or compensation.

Collecting feedback is the second part of documentation. Find ways to collect and share the responses to, and engagement with, the artwork with the artists. Photographs or videos of people observing their art, media coverage of the exhibit or performance, and collecting written responses are all ways artists would like to receive feedback.

- (You) know that **ARTISTS SHOULD NOT WORK FOR FREE.** The creative labor and the final output or object that an artist produces both need to be compensated for.

Art Contests: Artists are often asked to send original work that they never get paid for or even returned to them. They offer a “hope” of winning and receiving prize money or some accolade. If the art is sold, reused, or appropriated, artists have no way of knowing and no documentation to build a portfolio.

Art Donations: They often exploit the position of incarcerated people and their perceived need to “give back” and support causes and organizations that they have been impacted by or worked with in the past. Artists do not have to “earn” their right to show and sell their artwork. It is unprofessional and exploitative in nature to ask incarcerated artists to give their labor away for free.



Artists must be included in the pricing of their work for sale. Organizations and individuals must ethically pay artists for their work. Exposure does not pay the bills.

• (You) **ethically pay artists**, meaning:

- Pay a living wage for hourly production/performance work
- Use fair market value pricing of art objects
- Support with professional development, educational credits, or other resources that are available
- Pay for all communication and shipping costs
- Buy materials or other in-kind supports
- Pay on time
- Pay using the method designated by the artist
- Are upfront about any gallery fees or any need for contracts or W-9's
- Support with framing/finishing/installation costs

The best (You) according to (Our) expertise:

- Cares about the person who is incarcerated, not their labels
- Supports artists' other activities and interests
- Communicates changes in plans and bad news honestly
- Uses appropriate representation and language
- Documents and archives artists' work
- Helps the artist's support network to engage with their work
- Builds this community up by working with artists, not on their behalf.



ARTISTS' CREDO

I have the right to find and create opportunities to support my own art practice, to partner with staff/volunteers who can be partnered with, and to support the development of other artists inside.

I have the right to assert my creativity, ingenuity, and ability to teach myself, to discover new ideas, to practice my craft, and to monetize my work in the ways that I choose.

I have the right to control my own narrative, including how I am referenced and what parts of my story are public vs. private.

Artists don't work for free, and I have the right to ask questions about compensation, including:

- **What exactly am I being compensated for?** For my time and labor? For a project? For a piece, object, or outcome?
- **How am I being paid?** Money on my books, supplies, boxes/in-kind support, money sent to a family member or trusted outside ally?
- **When will I receive the payment?**
- **Do you have a contract?** Can I create a contract for us?
- **What additional costs do I have?** Shipping, communication, etc. Those should be covered expenses.
- **Can you agree to document my work and share it with me through photos, JPAY, etc.?**
- **Can you agree to a plan for how and when we will communicate?**

I have the right to leave or stop any project at any time. The nature of my confinement limits my access to communication and information, disrupts my daily routines, and is constantly changing, therefore, I have the right to walk away from any project with or without further explanation.



CONCLUSION

The first phase of this project concludes with the creation of this guide. We hope to distribute this within institutions and to organizations and individuals partnering with artists inside. Knowledge is power; we hope to raise the threshold of treatment, understanding, and agency for artists like us. To that end, it has become very clear that many of the challenges our inside team members face are centered around their lack of access to resources, technology, and information, to develop their artistic practices. They want professional representation in the form of gallerists, curators, agents, producers, and managers, that are built on trust to grow their networks and ability to create and share their work.

This guide is not meant to be digested in a personal or an organizational vacuum. We look forward to building consensus, sharing experiences, and thought partnering with our readers as we strive toward our collective goal: abolition of the carceral state and equitable treatment of the artists living in it, through it, and beyond it.

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