

ART

# Fannie Sosa Is Helping Artists of Color Be Heard, Respected, and Get Paid

The artist's guide for white art institutions to “stop demanding slave labor under the guise of diversity” has given countless artists of color more agency.

BY TAYLOR CRUMPTON

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A screenshot from "A White Institution's Guide For Welcoming People of Color\* and Their Audiences" Fannie Sosa/Tabita Rezaire

For years, the artist and activist Fannie Sosa has helmed projects that do two things (among many others) very well. First, they heal and celebrate queer, female, genderfluid, and POC audiences — goals accomplished by work like *Black Power Naps*, a 2018 project that aimed to give Black people and people of color a safe, empowering place to rest, and their ongoing series of twerkshops, which use both theoretical and practical approaches to Afrodiasporic dance to “activate the pleasurable body of color,” as described on Sosa’s website. The second is achieved through the first: By creating spaces and art that centers bodies like theirs’, they deconstruct binaries, colonialism, racism, and other oppressive ideas in ways that turn heads and hold your attention in a vice grip.

In 2016, Sosa continued their commitment to decolonizing and upending the art world by writing *A White Institution’s Guide For Welcoming People of Color\* and Their Audiences*, and collaborating on its design with fellow artist Tabita Rezaire. (The footnote for the asterisk: “\*In its pro-Black, pro-hoe, femme-centric, anti-academic, non-european, decolonial meaning.”) It aims to help institutions seeking to host and exhibit work by artists of color to “stop demanding slave labor under the guise of diversity,” as the WIG puts it. At every step of the way — from first contact to artist transportation to before, during, and after in-person events — **it outlines** a plethora of ways white institutions fail to consider artists’ needs, including by holding events that force them to interact with majority-white audiences, denying them means to record their work, and, perhaps most importantly, by failing to pay or underpaying them.

Since it was published, the WIG has been put into practice by over 200 art institutions around the world, and has enriched the agency and financial means of untold numbers of artists of color. After going offline in 2018, the WIG was re-published by Galerie Galerie, an online art gallery based in Montreal, earlier this year. To celebrate its arrival, Sosa took the time to talk with *them*. about the revised 2020 edition of the WIG, how artists of color can integrate pleasure into their work, and her contributions to an artist-led movement for their rights.



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**Due to the coronavirus pandemic, museums across the nation have furloughed workers in an attempt to offset the loss of primary income from admissions. However, managerial staff, trustees, and board members have refused to implement pay cuts to supplement workers' loss of income. Did these factors influence your decision to produce a revised version of the White Institutions Guide?**

When I first published the White Institutions Guide in 2016, I had more short lived “gigs,” like panels, workshops, sometimes DJ sets... this influenced my personal relationship with the institution. I had to implement different kinds of tools in the revised version, because my practice has shifted toward longer lasting, more generational work. As you move through an institution, you have to fight for your rights and stability because the nature of our job is very unstable. The WIG is an ongoing work, because the kinds of conversations artists of color and queer artists need to have with white institutions are ever-evolving.

To be in these institutions is an absurdity and contraction, so thw WIG is a lifhack for you to come in strong and show that you know your rights and what you're standing for.

## **Compared to their white counterparts, queer artists of color often lack financial access to resources. How did you approach releasing and pricing the revised guide?**

White institutions make you feel like you have to be grateful to be there in the first place, let alone negotiate a fair honorarium or fee. Before I published the revised White Institutions Guide, I dealt with imposter syndrome and believed that people would be mad at me for charging a fee for this information — that this information should be common knowledge. After doing some introspective work around value and labor, I decided to put a partial version of the guide online for free, and make the remainder available on a clear and itemized sliding scale system, based on an individual's access to culture, health, and rest.

I had to call upon my ancestors and all my friendly entities to garner the energy and resources to release an updated version. It took me 4 years, believe it or not, This document originates from my experience with white institutions — hours of emails and days of labor, with a side dish of PTSD — and the deliberate unpacking of my imposter syndrome into a clear, concrete guide. It has my blood.

From 2016 to 2018, the WIG was used by over 200 cultural institutions across the world, and I didn't receive one dollar, Euro, or penny for it. Before I released the second version, I had to have a conversation with myself: "You have to give this work its value." The sliding scale system was constructed in a clear way that helps people think about what they consume and give value to.

## **How did you integrate pleasure politics into the guide, while ensuring that it remains accessible and focused on helping artists make money and survive?**

The guide reflects my work in pleasure as resistance and rest as reparation. It's telling white institutions, "I don't only need to pay my rent. I don't only need to eat. I need to live well. I want to have a good quality of life." That's what I'm aspiring to facilitate. Covering rent and food is the bare minimum, and it doesn't allow artists and creatives of color to think of ourselves as enough. the guide has a tongue-in-cheek intention of sprinkling luxury, seeding pleasure, creating time, financial stability [and] space [as] all things that the artist needs.

For example, if I ask for weed to be bought in advance because I'm a criminalized if I go to get it myself. the institution has to care about my body being in danger, about the stress being there creates, the unrest. From then, it will be easier to ask for a cab from the airport or to

receive a particular brand of good water. This guide is really important because it's not based on the notion that we want to achieve coverage of our basic needs. No, we want our rest and pleasure to be given to us. I think that's why the guide touches people so much.

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**Historically, board members of white institutions have donated to political administrations that uphold existing power structures and dynamics. What happens when these institutions elect to participate in the oppressive nature of our society?**

As an artist of color, it's a psychically charged situation to be working at a white institution. We are the ones providing the content that brings life into the institution. We are the ones making them stay alive; therefore, our life needs to be protected.

There needs to be acknowledgement from the artists and white institutions about the holistic care we need. I'm aiming for the guide to change the canon on institutional care standards for artists of color by white institutions.

That is why the guide is also a circulating art piece, because I want this to be attached to different artists who have contributed to these conversations and touched me. It's not a cold document used in keynotes in academic places; it's a living document.

The institution should be grateful for our existence, that we survive, that we thrive even, that we have been able to keep ourselves alive and showed up, to be honest. Celebrate more than our production as artist, celebrate our life.

It's really important to have a shift in vision because you are defending your space, your right, and your birthright to be in those spaces. I hope to contribute toward a movement that encourages artists to stand for their rights.

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