

Odd Jobs

Making a Living and Making a Life as an Artist in New York City

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Preface

This is a story about work. It is a story about the work of artists in New York City today. It is a story about what work means and how it functions and why it's done. It is important that we get on the same page about what exactly work means. What is work for us?

Work is a living. Work is labor performed to pay the bills. Work is the day job. Work is the odd jobs. Work could be the emotionally intimate work of childcare or the physically exhaustive labor of production. It could be dressing as a princess or posing in the nude. This is the type of work that serves as our entry point to these stories.

Every artist in this piece is an artist who works for a living. They must work to afford their artistic career and the life that surrounds it. Like most artists today our income comes from something other than our artistry. This labor may be artistic, but it is not our art. This work often requires us to reconcile making a life as an artist with making a living some other way.

Every artist in this piece works outside the conventions of “standard” employment. We may be self-employed, we may make a living from a patchwork of part-time jobs and one-off gigs. Our work does not fit neatly between the hours of nine to five, Monday to Friday. Our work does not live inside the walls of an office or a virtual workspace. Our work does not guarantee a consistent paycheck every two weeks. Our work does not guarantee health insurance, sick days, or PTO. We have all made the choice to live in a perpetual state of precarity. We all have made our peace with instability. This work is making a living.

Work is also art. Work is the shows we may be paid pennies to perform, or nothing at all. Work is the hours spent writing, devising, and creating something new on friends' living room floors. Work is the endless cycle of self-tapes and auditions, shouting into the void and waiting for an echo of response. Work is practice, practice, practice. Work is years of training and honing and striving.

This work is often unpaid. This work is often unseen. This work may not look like work to many outside of the arts. We have all experienced the sidelong glances and genuinely well meaning, but nonetheless demeaning comments that minimize this work, that seek to reduce it to a hobby, a pipedream, an embarrassment. This does not change the reality that this work is work. This work may be fun (sometimes), may be passionate (hopefully), but none of that undercuts the demands it places on our minds, our time, our bodies.

This work is a purpose. It is a vision or a calling, a community or an unyielding yearn to create. This work helps us to know ourselves, helps us to design the worlds and lives we wish to live in. This work is making a life.

Making a living and making a life. One is required for the other to be possible. The artists who have told their stories here have all negotiated the balance between making a living in New York City and making a life as an artist. Work is our door to the lives they have made, let's step inside.

“if you can do anything else”

Introduction

“If you can do anything else, do that instead.” This is perhaps the oldest advice handed out to aspiring theatre artists. As a teenager I found myself deeply resentful of this adage. Of course I can do other things. I *could* do anything I wanted to. (In my teenage naivety I believed this statement to its full logical conclusion.) But theatre is what I *want* to do. Why should my fluency in other disciplines foreclose upon my future as an artist?

And yet I let this counsel narrow my vision. I came to define myself principally as an actor, seeking legitimacy in particularity. I allowed the imposed necessity of singular dedication to define the occupation of my hours and the field of my vision. Only after years of rejection, redirection, and redefinition would I come to see the ironies inherent in this path.

On the one hand, rare is the artist who does not *need* to do something else. I will not dispute the existence of the rare booked and busy prodigy, who jumps from the cradle of a BFA to the lights of Broadway. Even for those lucky few, Broadway contracts end and they will almost surely find themselves in periods without work as an artist. And for the vast majority who build careers not beneath marquees, but in bar back rooms, Bushwick black boxes, and the regional stages that dot America’s backyards, artists may find themselves occupying the majority of their hours with their *something else*: their day job.

In a professional landscape that demands your presence in the nation’s most expensive cities, and yet refuses the infrastructure of support that has historically allowed the arts to flourish, most artists find themselves on the brink of economic precarity. Work is sparse and

competitive and even when it is found, often pays a poverty wage. And for a limited term at that— a night, a week, a few months if you're lucky. Actors, directors, musicians, and other performers find themselves clamoring against one another for opportunities that may pay half the bills for a few months' time and feeling deep gratitude for even that. Such is the nature of the performing arts today.

So for most *something else* becomes a necessity. The day job, be it childcare, food service, the forms of entertainment that actually *do* pay, manual labor, or the myriad other forms of labor, from the eccentric to the very mundane, that one may find in New York, becomes a self made infrastructure for supporting life as an artist. It is these jobs that pay for the headshots, the dance classes, the travel to auditions, the post-show drinks, the birthday cakes, the lunches, the water, the rent. It is these jobs that afford a life.

For life as an artist means so much more than work as an artist. Life as an artist means autonomy. Life as an artist means self-direction. Life as an artist means daring to imagine a lifeway outside of the clear cut and conventional. Life as an artist means a lens that refuses to accept the world as it is and demands we imagine what it could be.

And it is in this definition that the second great folly of the narrow instruction to do something else whenever possible becomes apparent. If building a life meant only funding survival, I could have been a lawyer, Liv could have been an astronaut, Iman could have been a dentist. But in the totality of our lives I do not believe that we could have done something else. I do not believe that we could have found satisfaction in a life that did not allow us autonomy over our time, our minds, and the future we create.

So maybe there is some truth in the old advice. If you can live another way, please go do that, it is surely easier. But if the future you hope for demands the life of an artist, there may be no other way.

“I have one life!”

Hannah McGrath

Actor/Graphic Designer/Marketing Manager/Babysitter

When Hannah McGrath arrived in New York she only really knew one thing: what she would *not* be doing. “There were things that didn’t call to me about service industry jobs. I was bored. I’m not someone who handles being bored well at all. I think it just makes me question like why? What’s the purpose of my life if I’m working retail in a job I hate, watching people come in and be rude to me or my coworkers?”

Hannah is a “jack of all trades” (master of some), who refuses to limit herself. “I moved to New York not necessarily feeling like ‘I will be an actor,’ but thinking like ‘I’m gonna throw a bunch of stuff at the wall and see what sticks.’ I have a lot of interests and I’ve always had a lot of interests. I kind of, in my adult life, have not put myself into a box and I kind of pursue a bunch of different things all the time and at once. Maybe if you look at my career and my life from one specific angle you’d be like ‘yeah well she chose to pursue stage acting,’ but I honestly in my own brain feel like I’ve never really chosen. When you open yourself up to doing so many things then so many odd jobs and opportunities arise, just from opening yourself to the world of like ‘I’ll do most things.’”

Hannah was drawn to New York by possibility. By the possibilities for an actor like her in the New York theatrical market and the possibilities for the life she could build around and alongside a theatrical career here. Philly born and Chicago educated, New York was a conscious choice for her. “I didn’t feel like people would be looking for an actor like me in the theatre they

were trying to make in Chicago. I felt like the theatre that was being made in New York just aligned better with the type of actor I was. And Philly has a great theatre scene, but the minimum wage in Pennsylvania is so low. I didn't want to be a teacher and I didn't want to be making \$7.25 an hour doing anything. And New York maybe the cost of living was higher but it felt like maybe there was more opportunity to have different kinds of survival jobs."

Hannah is kept in New York by a pure and honest love for the city. "Looking back I was so giddy about everything my full first calendar year living here. I love it here. I can't see myself ever moving. I'll move to Brooklyn eventually, but not further than Brooklyn." Hannah's relationship to New York might be best summarized in the words of another friend "Everybody has a city that they're hotter in. And Hannah, yours is New York."

Once Hannah had arrived in New York and was beginning the process of finding what sticks, she was referred to a babysitting agency by her friend and roommate, as an easy pay-the-rent job, that didn't quite repulse her nature in the same way as the service industry. With years of prior babysitting experience and, one might say, a playful, childlike spirit herself, this was a natural first New York job. The agency is Broadway Babysitters, an agency created by actors to solve the problems many actors face while earning a living in childcare.

"It's called Broadway Babysitters because it was started by Broadway actors who wanted to create a way for both actors who were looking for work between gigs to have easy work, but also to create affordable childcare for families in the industry. And to create a network of sitters so that if somebody gets a gig, gets a callback, or an audition there are other sitters available that can jump in." Opportunities, be it for an audition, a callback, or a paying gig itself often come at the last minute in the performing arts. "So much of the arts and entertainment industry is just operating on a way different timeline from normal people." This often means that actors are

offered an opportunity that requires leaving or rearranging work with 24 hours notice or less. In many traditional private childcare roles this presents a major issue, for families and actors/babysitters alike. “I have actor friends who are like ‘the family won’t let me off tomorrow and I have a callback.’ And that’s really why Broadway Babysitters was created, to solve that problem.”

With Broadway Babysitters if an opportunity arises that interferes with scheduled hours the babysitter offers up the shift to the Broadway Babysitters network and it will be claimed and covered by another artist/babysitter. “The idea is you have coverage if you have something come up and you’re not ruining your relationship with the family. And it’s like okay great, now another actor gets however much money you’d make from this three hour booking.”

For Hannah, this network becomes especially important when booking contracts that take her out of the city, sometimes for significant stretches. “Something I love about being a theatre actor is the chance to go somewhere completely random for a couple months at a time, but it’s never permanent. I left New York City for a very long time at the end of 2025 so then a lot of my gigs kind of got messed up. This time when I came back because I was gone for so long I was like ‘Oh shit. None of my jobs are here anymore. Everything has fallen apart.’” Even with many part-time, gig work positions, like the ones Hannah holds in social media marketing and events production, there is a degree of commitment required, even when commitment and stability may not be offered in return. After a theatre contract takes Hannah outside of the city “I’m not their go-to person anymore. I wasn’t here for four months and they obviously have to rely on other people. But that comes with what a privilege it was to be working full time as an actor for four months.” Broadway Babysitters offers the chance to slot right back into reliable work after however long, however abrupt a time away, no harm, no foul.

The promise of coverage and added stability offered by Broadway Babysitters requires a slight trade off of autonomy and earning potential as compared to independent childcare work. “The rates are not set by me, they're set by the company. With Broadway Babysitters you're making slightly less than you would be babysitting independently and it's also on the books.” The question of on or off the books looms large in New York City private childcare. Many independent babysitters and nannies prefer working under the table, not reporting or underreporting their income and skirting the accompanying income tax. Working on the books necessarily entails a lower take home pay, but for Hannah is worth the trade off. “I think that's nice because then I have a record of my income that looks a little bit more legit. That's been nice to have. Especially getting an apartment in New York is really crazy and it's really important to be able to be like ‘look, this is how much money I made.’”

The constant movement that Hannah finds in her day to day with Broadway Babysitters satisfies her urge to stay in motion. “With a kid there's endless opportunity for things to do with them, inside, outside. And even if they're taking a nap then it's like I can be doing something on my own and feel productive.” Hannah's craving for chaos suits a life of gig work and out of town contracts. There is a harmony between the realities of her pursuing her artistic passion and the kind of life she craves. “I thrive like this. It's a little bit like you're always chasing what's next and some people, like, that gives them such pure and utter anxiety. Going into a week not knowing what that week looks like at all, that's really scary to some people. But I kind of love it.”

There's an alternate class of artists who attempt to pursue traditional stability alongside a career in the arts, often through a mindless, remote nine to five. These artists may be following the frequently lauded council that when you're pursuing the arts your survival job *should* be mindless. There's something compelling in the consideration that not caring about your day job

leaves room for passion to grow in your artistry. But not for Hannah. “There's a time and a place for a kind of job where you just clock into work and then you clock out and can forget about it. But I don't think I'd want to do that work all of the time. I have one life! I understand why people give that advice if perhaps for some kinds of people that's energy saving. But for me it's not energy saving to do work that I'm not passionate about.”

Her desire for the pursuit of passion not only in performance, but in the work that fills all of her hours is increasingly pushing Hannah towards developing parallel careers in marketing and theatre, and moving away from her work as a babysitter. The idea of parallel careers diverges from traditional conceptions of a “day job,” while still maintaining the flexibility and autonomy to allow a full and brazen career in the arts. As she has grown into her life in New York Hannah has increasingly found that survival jobs like babysitting lack “a clear trajectory or a clear path. There's no ladder to climb necessarily, it's just a job that will make you money. There's no clear next stop if you've done a good job. There's no raise or promotion after two years as a babysitter. You might get an hourly increase, but you're not all of a sudden gonna become ‘senior coordinator babysitter,’ that's not how it works.” Social media and marketing “feel more like a career as opposed to a job. A career has build.”

Maintaining two careers of her own making permits Hannah an authority over her own professional past and future that she fears would be lacking in a more conventional career path. “I think about people who have full time jobs and feel like it's their life's work and they've climbed the corporate ladder and they're very talented at whatever field they're in and working at a company or a couple companies and having a forty year career in their industry and then getting laid off. And it feels in a certain sense that so much was taken away from them if you're to be stripped of a certain job title. The career I've built, it feels like it's full of little pockets of

experiences that will never be done again and cannot be recreated. Yes, so many of the jobs I've done are short, but nobody can take those away from me now."

“finishing the hat”

Max Carlson

Actor/Writer/Comedian/Production Manager

Max has always been drawn to the creative vanguard. As a child he idolized the greats of early YouTube and found his first creative outlet in creating and posting sketches of his own. “It felt like it was ours and not anything that our parents could be hip to. It was a separate place that we could escape to. I still have a lot of admiration for people who take leaps on new mediums and stuff.” Admiration soon led to emulation as Max and his fifth grade friends began recording and posting their own comedy skits to youtube. “They started getting seen by people at school. I remember I got on the bus and someone told me ‘hey I saw that sketch that you made and I really liked it’ and the thought of being perceived freaked me out so much that I deleted everything immediately. That didn’t kill the want to keep doing that kind of stuff, it was just an interesting intro to what perception of one’s work felt like to me as a kid.”

It took another few years and another few mediums for the love of “getting people together and making stuff” that he discovered through YouTube to carry Max into the theatre. “I did it as a way to get away from something else. People I know who’ve been doing theatre since they were three weeks old or whatever, often there’s a sort of toxic culture that takes away from their perspective of the why, but it just felt like a big party to me. I’m very grateful that I was just sort of plopped into it later in the game and found it so immediately intoxicating.”

To hear Max speak of his craft is to hear that intoxication, like a man in love. “It’s about communicating a truth. And that’s a beautiful thing. It feels like discovery. A lot of my actor

friends and I talk about how funny it is that as soon as you understand the play the show's over. I don't subscribe to this notion that everything stays the same. I think being present in a scene is what's required of you to communicate honestly. The thing I feel like I'm honing is that presence and the ability to really hear, take in, respond, rather than just give a same rigid performance every night. I think everything is really based in one's willingness to be vulnerable and to discover how they feel about a thing even if they don't necessarily know the whole scope. I try to not tell the audience how to think, but let them know that I'm thinking."

In college, theatre quickly became not only Max's major but a new outlet for the drive towards the creative vanguard he'd first encountered in his childhood YouTube obsession, particularly when joining up with friends to self produce new works over a summer in Cincinnati. "We did it in the back of a law firm that wasn't being used. That was the first time I was really making art without any backbone of support, like there was no school attached, there was no authority figure that I was trying to impress for the sake of them helping guide me more or whatever, it was just us making art and no one's making money." The freedom of creating art outside of the institution was revelatory in Max's emerging understanding of what a life in the arts might be. "It really reinforced to me in that moment that art is as good as the people you make it with. It led me down a path of- I'm not really interested in pursuing this for commercial means. I'm more interested in the catharsis you get from putting on a really good show with a good group of people who are all committed to a common cause."

Max's understanding of what it means to make good art was constituted in these counter cultural creative spaces. The result is a craft of continuous revelation. "All of the choices I make as an artist are very centered around creating a kind of controlled chaos. I think I have a question in mind and I want to pose that question and not necessarily answer it. I find myself much more

attracted to projects where there's room for discovery and it's not rigid. I find that rigidity is sort of the death of the thing.”

The winds launched by the back-of-law firm theatre in his Cincinnati summer blew him to New York the following year as a production intern for The Public Theater’s Shakespeare in the Park. Shakespeare in the Park, the annual summer Shakespeare festival hosted in Central Park’s Delacorte Theater, is perhaps the truest expression of The Public Theater’s lofty goals. The Public Theater, arguably the most influential nonprofit theatrical institution in the country, holds “developing an American theater that is accessible and relevant to all people,” as its central operating principle. Shakespeare in the Park centers these goals through continuous reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s works, significant community outreach efforts across New York City, and perhaps most notably, the fact that tickets are free.

Shakespeare in the Park introduced Max to playful, curious theatre “at a caliber I’d never seen before. I never realized that theatre could be done at this level. I remember walking up to the Delacorte and it just felt immediately like this magical place that was outside of what was possible. It still had the common cause that these were people committed to getting Shakespeare out to people for free and not people who were just there to make a buck. So that was a wonderful driving force in terms of reinforcing that I wasn't just naive on that path, I was actually dialed into something that continued beyond just a college student's experience.”

On the daily, intern Max was perhaps not asking the grand questions he came to the theatre for, but rather mixing gatorade for the cast and crew and throwing in a helping hand across production departments, from carpentry to electrician work, all for the honor and privilege of \$25 a day. He was learning technical skills and jargon on the job, while discovering an

addiction to the novelty of the work. “I like having to grapple with the unknown on the day to day. It keeps me interested. If I had to do the same thing day after day I would just be bored to tears.” The same process of discovery that inspires his craft revealed itself anew through the hands on work of theatre production.

When it came time to graduate and consider next steps beyond his home state of Indiana, New York was the obvious destination for Max. “If you wanna work on new pieces of theatre New York is the place to go. All my friends were here and I knew that if I had an artistic base to work from it would be much easier to attain the things that I wanted. I made a commitment to following through with the things I wanted.”

After working a summer as a barback in Indianapolis to save up money Max moved in with a group of friends to the Bed-Stuy apartment that he still calls home. Continuing the “classic actor work” of the restaurant industry seemed like a natural next step upon his arrival, until the production work he’d begun at the Public came knocking on his door. “I’d been in New York for three days and I remember my old supervisor from my internship at the Public texted me and was like ‘we need help, come through to the park.’” The work he’d been doing for \$25 a day now earned him \$23 an hour, carrying him through the end of the summer park season and into several more months of work at the Public’s downtown home base.

Max had fallen into a day job that he was good at, that invigorated him, and that allowed him to stay connected to his chosen industry. “That felt like a step. I was being paid to do theatre for real. I am very very lucky, I’m one of very few people who is very lucky to have made a career only working in theater since I moved to New York, which is shocking to me.” Unlike most college graduates Max was now making a living off the labor of his body, rather than solely his mind. “I learned the value of a hard day's work. I was exhausted every day. I would go home

every night exhausted, but just really satisfied, because I could actually visualize the work that I'd done.”

Far from divorcing this work from the heady work of acting, Max sees a clear and present interplay between them. “I am a big believer in understanding the entire process of theatre makes you better at everything. Being a better electrician makes you a better actor. Being a better audio technician makes you a better director. I think these things have to exist with and alongside each other. And the more you understand each element the more you're able to play to that and present a cohesive vision. Trusting that your technicians are artists gives you a level of understanding as to how every element needs to be firing in favor of the story. You see how people make mistakes when they don't treat every element of a film or of a stage performance as being as crucial as all of the others. I can initiate fear or joy or sadness or hope in people based on the intensity and color of a light. Art is something that so lives and breathes on the minutia of the craft that you have to pay attention to those things if you wanna make something that is lasting. They're all telling the story.” Max sees making a play like the pointillism of “A Sunday on La Grand Jatte,” the painting that inspired the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. “All the dots make up the bigger picture, I think that's the beauty of it all, learning how to do the dots. Finishing the hat.”

Nowadays, Max has graduated from the general production roles he undertook for his first few years to largely production management, managing a team of former Maxes in their physical labor. “Nowadays it's a lot more person to person focused rather than having to lean on my physical energy everyday.” Despite this shift he still finds value in taking on the more hands-on roles he had previously depended on. “I do still take a lot of the carpentry gigs and stuff when they come up because that's not something I want to lose sight of and it informs the work

in a whole new way. I often find that when I go back into a carpentry shift now or an electric shift I am constantly learning things and that is worth its weight in gold.”

There is also a financial necessity to take on whatever work comes his way. The work fluctuates. While a busy season might offer an eighty hour week and consistent, reliable employment, the dry season might offer three shifts a week if he’s lucky. “ I felt like I was doing a good job staying afloat and I had a realization that sometimes gigs pay a lot more and you’ll get a windfall out of nowhere. But even then you can't really count on that. You kind of have to live a very monk-like life and live below your means all the time. In production you’re booked very random days, it's not a nine to five most of the time. It's just not very predictable, it's not a consistent income so it's very difficult to budget. That led me to a lot of sort of financial trouble.”

Max’s strategy for staying afloat despite the precarity of his day job requires maintaining a diverse portfolio of relationships with theatrical institutions. “I would say making sure that you have three venues you’re working for is a good baseline. Because then when one doesn't have work the other might, and when they don’t have work the other might.” This strategy is based in theatre as we’ve grown to know it over the past half-century. In the wake of 1970s financial crisis and the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965, large non-profit institutions became both the guardians and the gatekeepers of American artistic creation. They ensured an ongoing, well resourced home for the arts, but also became an institutional filter through which virtually all art must pass to reach a public audience.

That is the artistic landscape Max founded this life upon, and it is crumbling. “The problem with that is theatre is a lot more volatile now than when I got here. Federal funding is gone. And additionally, when the economy gets bad, donors are less likely to give away their money.” A perfect storm of withdrawn support from the federal government and a declining

economy that diminishes donor contributions and requires potential audiences to prioritize the rising costs of essential resources like food and housing over the cultural enrichment of a night at the theatre has transformed the stable base of the artistic institution into an unsteady and decaying foundation.

“It's tough to see all these theatres go through this changing landscape because oftentimes it leads to changes in how they book their labor, to a point where the management folks and admin folks have to really reorganize how full time staffing works there too. Places close down and then you lose a venue and have to find another one. That can be really debasing. Tough. I'm taking a lot more carpentry calls right now, because with the landscape people just need less and less people. It's tough. And a lot of theatres are switching from producing models to rental models. Having people come in and use their space and just pay them money.”

To take the Public Theater, where Max got his start, as just one example, they lost \$35,000 in federal funding for Shakespeare in the Park alone when the National Endowment for the Arts implemented major grant cuts in May 2025, following Trump's threats to eliminate the agency. The NEA has become so entwined in the skeleton of American theatre that these cuts, let alone elimination, present an existential threat. By December 2025 conservative estimates posit that the Public had laid off at least 10% of their full time staff, including all assistant and associate level positions in the production department. This is following a 19% layoff in 2023 that had already slashed the theatre's operational capacity from its once prosperous peak.

“I think that the nonprofit theatre industrial complex became this machine that was eating itself because it was too big. I think there's a size issue and a volume to it. I often find a lot of these co-productions with commercial companies at non profit theatres– a lot of the theaters are very big on relying on that production because it will hopefully be the thing that sustains them

economically for the next decade or however long.” This is the Hamilton model: produce the off-broadway run of a future commercial smash hit and hope that it powers the rest of the theater's productions into the foreseeable future, as the Public did with Hamilton. It’s not a bad idea in theory, but clearly can only be sustained for so long if the Public’s current financial state has anything to say on it. At best, this leaves the non-profit theaters in a perpetual state of searching for the *next* Hamilton, before the money runs out.

“There's a lot of these big deals that are made that sacrifice a lot of the company's values in my experience, in order to sort of preserve the longevity of the thing. And I get behind that but at what point does that stop? There has to be a point where you draw the line, otherwise it's just gonna be nonprofit theaters hoping to produce profit based work all the time when that's not the point. It's either we succumb to ‘the dollar’s the most important thing in the art and that's what we have to work towards’ or find another path forward to make that dollar while not sacrificing your beliefs. It’s tricky and muddy waters where a lot of businesses are having to bank on that, which pushes the work to the wayside, which is the whole point.”

The good fortune that Max has found in being able to make his living and his art all within the temple of the theater means that the devolving state of the industry is now hitting him from both sides. “It makes it more difficult to find access points, because people don't wanna bet on things they don’t know are gonna make them money or garner them notoriety or anything. Art’s always gonna be a volatile business and I think that's to be expected, but right now it's really hurting. It’s really difficult to get past a lot of the gatekeeping to put up a show.” As the gates to artistic creation are narrowed by industry level financial circumstance, individual financial circumstance becomes a greater and greater player in the work that gets produced.

Often the work that slips through the increasingly tight funnel to the stage comes from those who were born into either industry connections or the money to fund their own work.

“I had this idea that I showed up to New York because I wanted to go to this hat shop and I wanted to buy this special hat that's behind the counter and not everyone has access to it. You go to this hat shop and you say ‘I wanna wear that hat.’ And there's a couple of ways you can learn how to wear that hat, either your parents have worn the hat and the person who is running the counter knows that and trusts that you're gonna take good care of the hat because your parents did. And if you don't the parents will get you back in line on how to wear that hat well. Or you can come in with a ton of money and offer so much money to the clerk and the hat store that it would be irresponsible of the clerk not to sell you the hat. My method was I was just gonna wear seventy-two hats at the same time to show him that I was capable of wearing a hat. And that's not necessarily conducive I think to wearing one hat well.”

Looking towards an exit from the deteriorating conditions that define theatre work in New York right now, Max sees a future in creative solutions from creative populations and the re-examination of form that drew him to the arts as a child. “It's really tough and I don't know anyone who has *the* solution, but I do know a lot of people who have a lot of ideas about it, which is really exciting and does give me a lot of hope for what the next step looks like. One thing that has always perplexed me is this lack of a willingness to work theatre into the digital as if it's just going to wipe away the real presence and sanctity of the thing. And I think that that hesitation gives me hope in a weird way that maybe that is the answer.”

“Through working in theatre you find people who you just believe in so so so much. And that's a magical thing that can't really be quantified. The reason you believe in them is because they continue to show up and show you that despite the circumstances they're gonna continue.

And I think that's the thing about theatre. It's such an old art form and there have been worse economic times than currently throughout all of history where it existed and yet it continues. So I think there's something within people that motivates this desire to tell stories regardless of circumstance.”

The intoxication with the craft of storytelling that drew seventeen-year-old Max into the theatre continues to power his understanding of why and how the life of an artist is worth pursuit, even in the shadow of a precarious future. “Being a working artist is really really really hard and you have to have a belief between reaching a financial goal through it to be able to keep doing it sustainably for sure, but beyond all those aspects I think that people have perspectives to offer to the world that only they can because only they are them. And you shouldn't deprive the world of those things just because the world isn't giving you positive reinforcement about it all. Everyone's perspective is beautiful and if you have a perspective that feels strong enough to share you should do everything in your power to do so.”

“everything, everywhere, all at once”

Olivia Behr

Actor/Writer/Singer/Fitness Sales Person/Nude Art Model

Olivia Behr never meant to move to New York. “I didn't wanna be here. I was too afraid of how much there is. It's like everything about humanity, but under a magnifying glass. Everything everywhere all at once. I was overwhelmed by the idea of New York. So I stayed in Chicago.” Following her undergraduate studies in Theatre and English at Northwestern University, Liv turned down the invitations of friends and colleagues to follow them to New York, choosing instead to spend her first two years post grad living and learning through work and creative projects in Chicago.

The primary creative project to which she dedicated her time and mind was *Lennox Mutual*, a telephonic theatre project from the experimental theatre group, Candle House Collective. Founded by a collection of Northwestern theatre students in 2018, Candle House has created a series of immersive, personalized theatre experiences, gaining acclaim for their telephonic projects— theatre that is performed one on one over a live phone call. Candle House Collective is dedicated to the creation of “alternate reality theatre,” and the production of works “that are unpredictable, that are testing the limits, that are maybe disgusting, or shocking or horrific.”

This past fall Candle House presented their first in person immersive work, *The Pineapple*, in New York. The opportunity to create live and in person with the collaborators Olivia had devoted years to virtually was an unmissable opportunity, even if it meant relocation

to the menacing metropolis. “They were like ‘we’re gonna start doing in person projects’ and I was like ‘I wanna be there. I have to get to New York.’”

Serendipitous alignments and a few months of planning led to moving in with college friends to an apartment in central Brooklyn in October 2025. “A lot of preconceived notions I had about what it was like to live in New York changed when I moved to Brooklyn. Coming from outside the city you think like ‘*New York, New York!*’ and like the whole thing is gonna be tall tall buildings everywhere and very cosmopolitan people bustling by always and loud music and things happening. But then you go into Brooklyn and you’re like this is really like Chicago, but just with better trains.”

Adjusting to life in New York meant an adjusted understanding of the realities of New York City. “I guess I looked down on New Yorkers. I was like ‘you’re not living in the real world. You’re living in a simulation.’ The empire in ego.” The harsh realities of making a living in New York soon tempered any preconceived perception of ease. “When I moved here I had that sort of conception and then living here I’m like ‘No, it’s hard.’ I tried to get a waitressing job for three months and I couldn’t get a serving job or a barista job. There’s so many people who love coffee more than me and so their barista resume is better than mine. One thing I realized is it’s not separate from nature, it’s an extension of nature and how harsh nature can be. That includes the harshness of human nature. The sharp edges of New York have been surprising to me as I’ve been trying to survive.”

In her earliest months in New York the artistic calling that drew her here, Candle House Collective, provided enough to sustain survival. Olivia was paid for writing experiences for telephonic participants, performing over the phone, assembling gift boxes for Candle House

participants, and rehearsing and then performing their first in person work. This was enough to make it through rent and other necessities until December.

The work that Candle House does is experimental, and thus by its nature, risky. Their in person experience was “1:4 immersive theater. One person, four actors. It doesn't make money.” Their commitment to the cutting edge in both form and theme also risked alienating the traditional funding forces of not for profit theatre. “It lends itself to things that can be offputting which is incompatible with getting stable donorship.” And yet despite these discouraging details, Candle House’s first dip into the New York scene was a smashing success. “We had patrons who were like ‘Let me support you in remounting this project. Let me support you in touring this project to Edinburgh or Overlook Film Festival, or just put it up in New York again so your wider audience you’ve created digitally can come see it.’” Suddenly, “this labor of love, this is something that could pay our bills.”

On the precipice of turning this creative devotion into a longer term source of stable income, pressure on the company was rising, and Candle House cracked. “The negotiations under the pressure of almost like ‘wow financial success through this thing that we thought was just a labor of love,’ we fell apart. The tension of that was too much.” With a new influx of money came tough decisions about how to spend it. While the majority of the executive board favored expanding the bureaucratic structures to support more and larger works, the artistic director feared “falling into the trap that other theatres fall into of becoming plug and play companies, repertory companies where you’re just putting up work you already made and aren't innovative, aren't making breakthrough things.” The tension between an executive board craving stable expansion and an artistic director rejecting institutionalization and limitations on

innovation created an irreparable fracture, and the collective that had comprised Candle House was no more.

“Beginning of January I'm losing the nonprofit that I came here to work with and I'm losing the project that gives me that initial sense of income.” The dissolution of Candle House as she'd known it left Liv lurching in the vast void of New York City. With Candle House serving as both her sole income and her *raison d'être* she now faced a challenge not only of passion, but of survival. Unlike many who live their life as artists in New York, Olivia does not have the cushion of familial financial support waiting to catch her if she falls. “My dad's a professional painter, my mom does doctor's billing, together they made less than \$50,000 a year. I had friends who would rather be dead than be the amount of poor that my family was.”

Having already been chewed up and spit out by the cut throat world of much of the New York job market, where a proper passion is required even for the privilege of serving you your morning coffee, Liv looked to less conventional sources and found a playbill listing for a nude figure model at the School of Visual Arts. After inquiring with a visual artist friend for some guidance about the role Olivia took the leap and applied. “Honestly it's a job. So I sent in pictures of myself clothed that showed me on stage or me with my friends, good pictures that showed my body. I submitted those. It's \$20 an hour so I was like maybe I'll get that,” and sure enough she did.

The formal training for this role was virtually zero. “No training. It's like a well established trade.” As a newbie to the trade Olivia had to balance research and preparation with a healthy dose of faking it til making it. “I seemed more professional I think than I am. I had no idea what I was doing. I'm a performer, I hopped into it.” When it came time for her first day, “I

was so nervous. I was so nervous. For so many different reasons. Because I was like I wanna do a good job, but I don't know what that looks like yet, so how do I give that? And then there's the whole aspect of I'm gonna be naked for the first time in a room full of people. When I saw the platform in the center of the room I was like (jaw drop)... okay.”

Figure modeling generally involves posing in the nude on a round platform with student artists seated on all sides, allowing every angle of the body to be visible to someone at all times. “I knew to expect it. But when you first see it and you know you're about to stand on that naked in a room of people I was like ‘oh my god.’ I was feeling like ‘oh my god’ nervous.” Thankfully for Olivia the nerves did not last long. Once on stage she is asked to present a range of poses ranging from short dynamic poses that may be held for anywhere from thirty seconds to five minutes, to long poses that could be held for up to twenty. “The first thing that I noticed was like ‘oh my god a minute goes by so much faster than you think.’ Same thing when we started going to five minutes I was like ‘wow that felt like nothing, I can do that, that's so easy.’”

The reality of the body being perceived through the lens of an artistic figure soon stepped in to quell her other anxieties. “The teacher would talk like ‘Look at the figure. Okay you see that angel and those curves of the figure?’ Just hearing my body be talked about in a depersonalized way started making me feel more comfortable about being there, because I was like they're not looking at me as a naked body, they're looking at me as providing these artists with a form to draw.”

Her work as a figure model has thus far been overwhelmingly positive in mediating her relationship with her own body. “I come from a very body complicated mental history. When I grew up a dancer and when you grow up in theatre you have very specific ideas of the way your body is supposed to look as a woman. I don't think posing in front of people naked for hours on

end has made my body insecurities worse. Looking at people's renditions of my body that isn't a photo or a video it's like their own interpretations of my body and seeing the variations sway from like 'I like the way that looks,' or 'that looks better than I look,' or 'my boobs are bigger in there,' and then seeing ones where it's like 'come on, like I don't look like that,' it brings levity to the issue of how I see my body in a way I haven't had before. The thing is with figure posing, it's the form of the body, but I'm a female form that has a softness to it, so you don't see a lot of my direct skeletal or muscle composition because I have body fat. And that's good and I like my body. It's very classical in a way."

On the job Olivia employs her dance, yoga, and movement background, in combination with her skills as an actor to breathe life into postures. "I think one of my things I bring to the table is I really try to bring a lot of dynamic poses. Variety and continuity of motion is something I think I'm good at. I try to bring my acting experience into it. There are times where I'll sort of do a character bit." Particularly in short poses she finds great freedom to employ props and continuous movement into her series of poses. "I started with just my body, just myself doing all of my favorite yoga poses. It felt like I was dancing. When it's shorter poses you can be more spontaneous. I bring this water bottle, I bring a book, I bring a hairbrush," playing with the shapes and expressions she can create with her props.

Though she finds modeling work largely enjoyable, it is not difficult to imagine the muscle strain that could be incurred when moving through and holding stone still in postures for three hours at a time. "By the end of class, especially with very active poses, I'll be shaking. It feels like I've done yoga for three hours." While these series of short and dynamic poses offer perhaps the most muscle engagement and later fatigue, the wrong selection of a long twenty-minute pose could offer perhaps the most grueling experience. In moments where she

realizes too late she has made a poor decision she recalls thinking “I gotta get better at this or I’m gonna have nerve damage.”

The story of Olivia’s time in New York thus far has been a story of getting by, on a slow route to something greater. “Now I have these jobs that are a bedrock with which I can pay my bills, buy my food, so now I can take the time to apply for jobs I actually care about. I know I make enough to pay my rent. And to pay my heat bills which have been like 100 bucks a month the last few months. I’m a picky grocery person. So my groceries are pretty expensive and so I’ll spend like a little less than \$200 every other week. So I can afford those things and my rent is like \$1,075 so you can do the math. And I only have like a couple hundred left every month from that breakdown. But it's enough to survive. My first step is getting jobs and spending as little as possible. And then I can start to optimize.”

Though she fell into this work by happenstance, Liv is not planning to leave it anytime soon. “I could see myself doing it for the rest of my life. It's so flexible and everywhere needs figure modeling. And now that I've done it and have experience I could do it anywhere. And because it's so flexible, if I wanted to I could tell them tomorrow ‘Hey I got a gig I can't work for five weeks,’ and they'd be like ‘Cool thanks for letting us know!’ And then in five weeks I'd reach back out and they'd be like ‘Cool we’ll get you booked.’ It's so flexible and it's relatively easy as long as I'm in good health. So I could totally see myself doing it forever as a small facet of a larger freelance artist thing. ”

Flexibility in her work is key in sustaining the fairly intensive personal artistic practice Olivia developed in her time with Candle House Collective. “We do custom curation. It’s not just like popping someone into an algorithm, it's like in order to create a meaningful bespoke experience with each person who comes through the door I have to sit and give people the time

of day and engage with the information they gave me meaningfully and really account for it and represent them well and represent them in a way that is honest. So much thought goes into the Candle House thing that if I'm not just too depressed that I'm like laying in bed, or I'm hungry so I'm making food, I'm writing. There's not enough time in a day." Following her departure from Candle House, Olivia has already started to pursue independent telephonic theatre projects, maintaining the commitment to immersive and ambitious work contracted therein.

Olivia's artistic self-definition is rooted in a curiosity about the world, combined with the discipline to pursue and transform that curiosity. "We are the universe experiencing itself and so in order to assist the universe in that process it's my job to be as curious as possible as I go throughout my life. Being an artist means being as curious as possible for the rest of my life about the world around me and the people around me. I think it also means tolerance and patience, because those are required for curiosity. You have to have a tolerance for the difficulty of navigating chaos, which is everywhere. And then discipline because there's so many distractions and sensations to get lost in that take you away from the kind of attention that curiosity requires and to recommit to that practice of curiosity is discipline. You have to train in order to use your body as a vessel for the things you wanna create or the things you wanna manifest through your art."

The practice of liberation that Olivia wants to manifest through her art is the light that guides her future. "I'm super interested in revolutionary and liberatory art. And that's great in theory. I've been stuck in theory for a while. I hope that no matter where I am, I'm able to remain rooted in an awareness of my positionality so that I can use whatever skills I have and resources I have to support the flourishing of love, tolerance, justice in a restorative capacity and not a punitive capacity. I hope that's a part of my future in a big way and that I'm not sidetracked or

jaded or stuffed to the brim with gluttony or too injured or unwell to spend a lot of time committed to that mission.”

Beyond that, her forward facing requests are simple, at least in theory. “My goal is to have a life that I have dental insurance. And have enough free time to make good food with people and be surrounded by artists who are thinking creatively.” Asked if she’s happy in the life she’s found herself in now she says “Yeah? Yeah. I think I'm not a happy person at my core. Not in a bad way, but in a way of like, I think I'm a very nostalgic, sentimental, melancholy, critical person. And I think that those don't lend themselves to happiness. But that doesn't mean that they don't lend me to feeling fulfilled. So I wouldn't say that I'm particularly happy but if I'm considering happiness as having my immediate survival needs met and feeling good and authentic in who I am and the things I've done recently, then yeah I'm happy.”

“me realidad es mi sueño”

Brittyn Dion Bonham

Writer/Actor/Party Performer/Receptionist/Faith Formation Leader

Brittyn Dion Bonham was an artist before she knew what that meant. Born to two children of immigrants in South Florida, she was “pushed into the industry” through her father’s work in commercials, beginning in early childhood. When asked to recall the moment she knew she would pursue the arts professionally she says “I don’t think I ever made that choice. I think it was just always my life.” Working as a child actor in McDonald’s commercials, car commercials, and an unrecollectable bounty of others, acting was a job before it was ever a passion for Brittyn. “I feel like I was never presented with a different option. I always had to live up to this great artistry and become mainstream successful.”

Born into the industry and raised in the craft, Brittyn’s young mind was shaped “to see the world as a theatre.” Her childhood experiences placed the lens of an artist over the world around her, like “rose colored glasses” tilting her perception towards romance and imagination. Artistry became entwined with her self definition beyond the scope of any particular work or medium. “I can’t think of any other way to identify, because I never fully feel like I fit in. And it’s a great thing. It’s something that I love about myself. I’m thinking outside the box in a way that I can only define as being an artist.”

The artist as outsider is a theme in Brittyn’s artistic work today, serving as director of STRANGEGIRLZZ theatre collective– “a Gen Z theater troupe dedicated to showcasing the good things that happen to femme people and redefining the relationship between femininity and Americana.” STRANGEGIRLZZ was born of Brittyn’s undergraduate thesis at Florida State, in

which she examined advertisements for freak shows. This led to her discovery of an infamous circus ad that poses the ponderance “Strange girls! Can they marry like other girls? Will they have children? Why were they born?” “And that’s how I feel. Will I marry? Will I have children? Why was I born? I’m weird.”

STRANGEGIRLZZ emerged into the New York theatre scene at the dawn of the post-Covid lockdown era. After a period of stagnancy, theatre was forced to find its footing anew. While many were consumed in whispered fears about when, how, and if the theatre industry would reclaim its place at the center of New York’s arts and commerce, others took the absence of show business as usual as a space for invention. “Theatre people are so physical and need to move and need to be around other people, so I think a lot of new works were going on. We made our own company and now we get to help put on other people's work.” Stepping into the role of creating space for the work of other women has opened new avenues for Brittyn’s engagement with the arts industries and her own identity as an artist. “I love emboldening other people [and] watching people feel confident for the first time in their own work.”

As Brittyn unfurled new creative avenues through her work with STRANGEGIRLZZ and pursued regional theatre work outside the city, she followed in the footsteps of many urban artists before and beside her in supporting her art with a multitude of survival jobs. She worked as a childcare provider, a teacher, a nanny, a receptionist, a party entertainer, and found success in her artistic endeavors. But something was missing.

Prior to moving to New York, she had graduated from Florida State with a degree in Theatre and English in 2020, stepping from the cradle of college into the lifeless landscape of live arts under lockdown. Given that state, she initially pursued work outside the arts, working as a “house mom” of sorts in a residential group home for formerly incarcerated youth in

Tennessee. She found joy and purpose in guiding these young boys into independence and found the landscape of this work to feed her spiritual nature. Brittyn's life is guided through "walking in the path of [her] higher power," a connection that was easily nourished by the access to nature and spiritual guidance aspect of her work in Tennessee.

"I was offered a promotion at the group home at the end of my first year there and I was seriously considering taking it." But, at the same moment a divergent path emerged— Brittyn's partner at the time was urging a move to New York. "We spent all of covid together so we were really codependent and he wanted to leave. And it was almost random that he wanted to come to New York. It felt kind of random. And he really convinced me. It felt like if I don't go now, when will I go?"

After significant deliberation, Brittyn stepped towards following her partner and her passion to New York. "It felt like this kind of work will always be here and maybe I need to serve my own dreams for a little bit before I go back to serving other people's dreams, but I got tired of it. Over the past couple of years [since moving to New York], I was working multiple jobs and viewing them as survival jobs to support my art. I kind of got to this place where I felt so— I felt like I was lacking something and I knew that it had something to do with feelings that I had when I was working at that group home. I was missing that sense of caretaking."

Despite the space for support and invention that she found in her work with STRANGEGIRLZZ Brittyn felt as though she was missing the sense of community and spiritual home in which she thrived. She began "setting [her] intention" towards finding work that would leave enough hours for her artistry, while delivering the spiritual fulfillment she found in "caretaking and supporting children in an at risk community."

Enter: Trinity Church. Though Brittyn does not necessarily identify as Episcopalian, or Christian for that matter, she had long found a spiritual home at Trinity Church, where she grew up attending services on visits to her grandparents. She finds that the Trinity congregation and leadership are open to those who identify with various faith practices, as long as they are aligned in intention. “We do so much work to better the community, all you need to be identified with is loving awareness to be accepted on the team. You don’t have to super identify as Christian.” In looking for a spiritual home that aligned with her intentions Brittyn found that Trinity is “super on it politically. I agree with what they’re putting their energy toward even if it might not be the exact same way I would do it.”

When Trinity put out a call for the brand new, part time position of Faith Formation Leader Brittyn knew she had found a fit. Practically her job consists of assisting with Trinity’s compassion market, a free market for at-risk New Yorkers, with a particular focus on “new neighbors” - recently arrived asylum seekers, as well as working in their afterschool program, their free childcare program, teaching Sunday school, and coordinating trips and spiritual retreats. In identifying who to serve, Trinity has turned their resources towards at-risk communities, with a particular focus on “people who are being targeted by ICE right now.” This means that meeting time is often spent in trainings “on how to help support our community in the face of threats of deportation,” and Spanish lessons to improve the “broken Spanish” with which she communicates with many of Trinity’s clients.

Psychically Brittyn identifies her job as “helping [the community] find safety.” “It’s hard. It’s hard because the young people that I work with are so smart and they have such great ideas and even though we do so much good and even though I love working in this position where I can help, we are still led by white men who maybe don’t see the full implication of how their

bodies exist in our space and how our young people are being impacted. Sometimes I'm at odds with the leadership just because I'm like, 'My voice and your voice are not the ones we need to be listening to right now. We need to be listening to our young people.' And I think it's easily forgotten that we're serving them and it's not the other way around. Which is a microcosm of what's going on politically. Even when you're trying to make the country better you're still doing harm."

Trinity Church is one of the largest landowners in New York City, with a \$6 billion real estate portfolio, based on 15 acres of land gifted to them by Queen Anne in 1705. This portfolio includes significant commercial rental properties, such as 7 Hudson Square, a commercial space spanning a full city block, that is currently on a 99 year lease to The Walt Disney Company. While recognizing the resources that this portfolio supplies for accomplishing the work Brittny has found so fulfilling through Trinity, she cannot fully reconcile this with the ethical question of a church with a curated real estate portfolio. "They own so much of New York's real estate. We're in a financial position where we could do so much more. And we should. But I guess it's a you-have-to-pick-your-battles situation. I don't think I would want to stay in a billionaire church forever just cause at the end of the day it's always going to be wrong."

Brittny is often putting in twelve hour days at Trinity alone, arriving for an 8:30 am start time and clocking out at the end of after school care at 8:30 pm. She balances this work with three other jobs and her work with STRANGEGIRLZZ. When I highlighted the length of her days, clarifying that she was in fact often working twelve straight hours she replied "oh, I guess so!" with laughter in her voice. Conflict with superiors and the exhaustive schedule of managing two passions and a livelihood in New York do not seem to shake the foundation of spiritual realization on which her life is built. "[The kids] are just so kind to each other and they're so

loving and jubilant. They're just happy. I feel way better now. I feel just happier and I feel like this is what I want to do."

The question of "what do you do?" is one that haunts many artists who earn their livelihoods outside of their chosen discipline. Yet for Brittyn the answer is fairly clear. To anyone who may ask, she "works with kids." Yet her internal answer is unwavering: "I'm an artist." Turning her artistry towards her inner self and away from an identity for public proclamation has been freeing for the validation-hungry child actor inside of her. "Because I was kind of pushed into the industry before I had the ability to make my own decisions I think the identity of an artist was thrust upon me and I felt like I always had to live up to that. And now that it feels more like a private thing. Walking through this space knowing that I'm an artist is all I need. I'm hearing music all the time even if music isn't playing. I'm seeing pictures all the time. I'm seeing a tapestry weaving together in real time in every step I take."

Her job with Trinity Church feeds her soul, spirit, and pockets, while the inescapable lens of the artist trails any work she touches. She brings a creative mind to her work with at-risk children and receives in return another lens to cast upon her artistic work. "They've changed the way I view the world. Watching the children experience things was mind blowing to me. And ever since then I feel like a lot of my artistry has more to do with motherhood and being forced to be a mother if you don't want to and the lasting impact of that. There's more themes of family coming through, more themes of isolation and abandonment. It definitely affects what I write, what I devise, and what I make."

In her Spanish language class she was recently asked to speak of her dreams and summarized it in one sentence. "Me realidad es mi sueño. I don't have any dreams anymore, not in a bad way, but in a great way. I already have everything I wanted. So I think I'm in a new

chapter where I'm redefining what my dreams might be. I couldn't ask for anything more in my life. Everything in my life feels like a symphony come together."

“relentless”

Iman Cooper-Williams Abdul

Writer/Actor/Founder/Entrepreneur/Party Princess Performer

Relentless. Iman was raised in a family of people who were going to make it work come hell or high water. “My parents are entrepreneurs. My grandparents were entrepreneurs and like raised me. They were landlords in a non predatory small way where they don't overcharge people and are like affordable housing certified. That's how they made their money when they came to the states. My grandfather was also an electrician. I used to go around with him collecting the rents, doing electrician work. He was also somebody that constantly had a bunch of random jobs, so I think I kind of learned that from him. He was very much somebody that was always learning. He could do anything. He could do everything.” In this family of strivers Iman was born into an ethic of relentless self-advocacy. “My parents were very much throw you in the water, you'll learn how to swim kind of people.”

“I think that I have a strong sense of self that I'm really proud of. Some people call it being sheltered, but I think I was sheltered in a way that allowed me access to information while also giving me the space to develop my own opinions, my own feelings, and my own ideas of the world, without caring so much about what other people thought. And that allowed me to make informed decisions quickly and decide what I wanna do quickly and know what I wanna do in ways that I sometimes don't feel my peers do.”

This sense of self allows Iman an unabashed dignity in understanding herself as an artist. “I'm an actor. I'm a writer. I write books, I write plays, I write a blog.” Her courage of self carries over thematically into the artistic work that she creates. “When I sent my book, *Iman's*

Little Blog, around to friends, someone said to me ‘No one's going to like a female character who's as confident as you write yourself.’ But I think confident, self assured women are the protagonist. And I really enjoy pushing back that stereotype that you’re the villain just because you like yourself. I feel like women and people of color are just not really allowed to exist the way that like cis white men are, on stage, on screen, like we have to be going through something so all of my work is actually focused on women and people of color having a good time.”

On the other side of this self starter coin is a resistance to anyone or anything who might usurp her autonomy. “I’m not good with authority. I find that I have no tolerance for abuse of authority and I will quit. I never became somebody who was like ‘I’ll do it because I have to.’ And I also just feel like ‘who are you?’ Like I don’t feel like a title makes somebody more capable or allowed to talk to people a certain way. I think that some of the smartest people are working low income jobs and some of the dumbest people are CEO of something. I just don’t care. I don't care who you are. I care about how you treat me and how you treat others more than anything else. So I think it’s just better that I employ myself.”

Iman’s first ventures in self-employment came straight out of high school, with a period care subscription box that she operated throughout her late teens and early twenties. But upon moving to New York she identified a gap in the market that she was perfectly suited to fill. She had been working as a party princess performer in her home state of Florida since she was fifteen years old. To the unacquainted Iman describes this work as “You know Princess Jasmine? I put on the wig. I put on the costume. I show up to your niece or nephew's birthday party. I am Princess Jasmine.”

“I wasn’t gonna do [princessing] when I moved up here, but I realized that nobody else was really doing it the way that I knew how to and I realized that a lot of my friends needed

money as actors. It's the kind of thing that has allowed me to do something that I love, that is acting, and have a livelihood, which you don't often get.” To meet the absence that she'd identified Iman founded Jersey City Party Characters, now a premier character entertainment company of the tri-state area. JCPC not only allows Iman to use the skills she developed in her musical theatre training, but permits an autonomy of time that is well suited to her independent spirit. “As long as I have my own financial freedom nobody can tell me what to do. I've always really understood that being in charge equals being in charge of your time as well, but also is a lot of responsibility. But I never really had another idea for how I saw myself. What you put into your work is what you get out of it.”

There's something in the nature of princessing at every level that requires the grit and self sustenance Iman prizes in herself. Speaking as a party princess of five plus years myself, a single day on the job might entail hauling two or more ball gowns across state lines, doing your makeup in the car or on the train between back to back parties, managing the calls of an anxious parent while simultaneously parallel parking a rental car, and putting on a one woman show for thirty children under four while three attempt to claim your undivided attention and a fourth tries to pull your wig off from behind. “I try to tell everyone, this is not a job if you're a pansy. You need to be like cool people who don't give a fuck if you want to do this. Some people I won't book them because I feel like they're big whiner babies. This one girl was like ‘you expect me to get on the train in my costume? This is New York!’ and it's like ‘*This is New York!!!*’ You have to be somebody that can think on the spot, somebody that is a self starter, somebody that can solve problems on their own.”

For all the chaos that must be endured, there is joy in equal measure inside the parties. “One beautiful thing about this is you get to be part of people's best moments and their best day.

On my hardest weeks in my personal life, when I go into a party I'm in a trance. You have to really put aside everything going on in your life and really be in this moment. The way that these children feel about you being there is so spirit lifting. You would think you came down on a golden cloud. My best day is any day where a child comes up to me and is like 'I'm so glad you're here and I love you.' They tell you that they love you. I always say that I love them too, because I do. I don't know them that well, but I do love them. I think love is something that is so hard to find sometimes, especially in New York. But I think that there's so many different types of love and that's just the base love of I love you as an individual just because you exist. Everybody deserves to be loved."

"Princessing" under her own authority has allowed Iman to make meaning of her life and labor. Most of the companies in the party princess industry maintain fairly stringent casting protocols, mimicking the Disney parks. They will cast specific performers to portray only specific characters who they canonically resemble to adult eyes. Iman has taken a different approach. While maintaining culturally appropriate boundaries on the portrayal of non-white characters, Iman has permitted flexible casting for all white characters, allowing people of various races and ethnic identities to step into these roles.

"I started to realize this doesn't make a lot of sense. Children don't see the features like adults do and there's no reason that someone just because of their background shouldn't be able to work this job and do a whole plethora and arrangement of characters. And then on top of that I was starting to get requests coming in for people that their child likes a specific character, but they want their child to feel represented and I was like, there's no reason that shouldn't happen. So I made the option to be able to book a 'character like me,' which of course doesn't extend to white-washing brown or ethnic characters, but does extend to creating space for people who have

less characters to choose from that represent them to have somebody who looks like them step into that character. One thing that I realized as I got older in this industry is that representation is so important. And seeing yourself is so important. It became very important for me to use this as a tool to create moments where these kids feel like they are special because people that look like them are showing up.”

Iman’s approach to princessing has created the space that she craves in her community. “I just love being part of my community. I grew up *in* my community. I grew up– I knew everybody. I knew who owned the businesses. And that's where I feel the safest. Just being part of my community and feeling community around me.” JCPC has given Iman the agency to craft the community she wishes to be a part of. “I am creating community outreaches and community events, places for people to mingle and interact. I want to be somebody who creates that for all types of people. Just somebody who builds a community around me and creates a world I actually want to live in. That's the purpose of everything I do. The art that I create. It's very selfish. I wanna live in a world where people are not looking at me like I’m the victim of my religion. And I wanna create something that changes that for the future.”

The pursuit of the world she wants to live in can become an all consuming summons. Requiring a dogged devotion to self-managing her work in the vision she wishes to create and carving out consistent intentional time for her writing and theatre work, the life that allows Iman such meaning-making provides little space for rest. “Relentlessness has allowed me to get here, but has also damaged so much in my life. My parents are like ‘you should never have a free moment because that means you’re lazy,’ but I'm trying to work on that. I feel like I should always be working more.”

Relentlessness is not a costless virtue. And yet it is relentlessness that has granted Iman the all too rare opportunity to live towards a future of her own making. “That is where I have ended up. On a trajectory to do the things I want to do in life. That is so, so rare to experience, because I see so many people living a life where they just did what they thought they were supposed to do and they didn't do what made them happy. And that's the norm, not the outlier. Being in a position like mine is the outlier and I'm really, really grateful.”

Iman's world is defined not by what it is, but by the greatest potential of what it could be. Her ethos is in living towards creating the future, her method is in the arts. “Art is one of the most far reaching mediums for change and I really need the world to change if I'm gonna live in it. If I can make change in the world, life becomes worth living to me.”

“thank you for the music”

Sophia Blake

Writer/Actor/Musician/Graduate Student/Nanny/Piano Teacher/Early Childhood Music Teacher

Theatre is a world of “no.” Can I play that part? No. Can I finish my audition cut? No. Can I even get in the audition room to try and show you what I can do? No. Can I make my living as an actor? No. Can I call myself an actor?

For a long time I dared to say yes to that final question. I had a degree in it after all, I devoted my time, my mind, my energy to the pursuit of acting. But every cocktail party proclamation that “I’m an actor” was haunted by the lingering feeling that I was a fraud, a pretender claiming success at something in which I was miserably failing. How could I call myself an actor while making my living in any and everything else?

My experience as an actor has always been shaped by “no.” A brave and honest friend in college summed up what I had always felt to be true: “you’re just not castable.” Some people slot in easily to the worlds that are most often portrayed on stage. They have a sound, they have a look that is easy to mold into the world of Hello Dolly!, or Newsies, or the jukebox musical du jour. After years of being turned down for being “too” (too tall, too different, too rock, too classic, too fat, too skinny, too loud), I began to wonder if the “star power, it factor” that mentors had always assured me I possessed was merely a euphemism for a presence that sits outside the commercially viable. Or maybe none of this is true. Maybe I ran up against so many nos due to my own failures or missteps or pure dumb (un)luck. Maybe this is merely a repair narrative I’ve constructed to comfort myself. I don’t know that there’s any way for me to know what is true.

But one thing I know to be true: I got sick and tired of asking for permission. Asking for permission to call myself an artist, asking for permission to feel like an artist, asking for permission to do art. All I want, and all I have ever really wanted, is to sing songs and tell stories. Why should there be such tight confines around these basic facets of human communication?

To a degree there has always been a limitation on what and how much art can be produced and by whom. Blame our cultural values, blame capitalism, the list of potential villains in this narrative goes on. But in our contemporary moment the arts are being strangled from within. The outlets that young creatives are presented with require that your art make it through the increasingly fine knit filters of artistic institutions, funders, donors, the personal capital to produce and sustain yourself in the process. It is a rare and lucky few who eek through to the stages we are taught to aspire to. At the same time that the institutions we have elevated to create art are tightening their own grip on creation, they are being crushed in the vice of dwindling federal funds for the arts and an economy that hardly encourages risky investments, which the arts have always been.

As the filters to reach the stages of well-funded, institutionally endorsed theatre get finer and finer, the opportunities to partake in this conventional path of professional artistry grow very thin. An already competitive industry, filled with a thousand nos in pursuit of one yes has narrowed the yeses even further. So how do I work as an artist? And how do I make a living in the meantime?

It is in pursuit of that “living in the meantime” that this story begins. I started teaching children's music in full and blatant honesty because I saw the economic potential. I love children, I'm inspired by the opportunity to mold young minds through music, etc., etc. This is all entirely and unironically true. But at the end of the day I was attending class with another children's

musician in my other occupation as a nanny, counted up the heads of the children in attendance, realized he was making \$800-1,000 an hour, and immediately thought “I could do that.” And I was right, I could do that and shortly thereafter launched my latest side hustle as Sing-A-Long Sophie.

Sing-A-Long Sophie didn’t get off to the easiest start. I started teaching my early childhood classes in June 2025, working exclusively in public parks to maintain zero overhead costs. This is a fine idea, until it rains the first three weeks following your debut class. My first couple of months were slow going, getting two, three, four, *maybe* five kids per class. Each time I felt like momentum was building, I’d be hit with a week of rain, or blazing temperatures that keep children confined to the comfort of AC, and get knocked back to the start.

I was, and still am, a one woman operation. So everything from marketing to bookkeeping to setting the set list to carrying the significantly heavy bags of equipment to class rests squarely on my shoulders. It can be semi-grueling— carrying four to five bags on the subway, across boroughs, setting up in the blazing sun, trying to manage the function of sound equipment while playing the guitar, singing, jumping, and engaging multiple children under the age of two, sometimes only to walk away with \$40 to show for it. So why keep it up?

One answer goes back to the inciting intention to get into it in the first place: the economic potential. I had seen the potential if I kept consistent, improved my marketing, and delivered a good product week after week. Along with this potential comes the absolute autonomy entailed in owning your own business. I set my schedule. If my schedule needs to change it changes. If I book a callback, shoot, or other gig I can cancel. If I want or need to go out of town I can cancel, all without the tension, risk, or frayed relationships I had experienced under these circumstances while working for someone else.

This is obviously practical when auditioning and (hopefully) booking artistic gigs, sometimes with 24 hours notice or less, a system that does not mesh well with most standard modes of employment. But more than the practical there's also something in my spirit, and I'd venture to say the spirit of many artists, that bucks the restraints of a job that dictates your time, your days, your mode of dress, your voice, your space to think and be. Autonomy is counterbalanced by risk, but I find that my tolerance for risk and precarity is far greater than my tolerance for living my life within the constraints of conventional employment.

Another reason returns to the perhaps corny, but undeniably true fact that I do love young children and find great inspiration in being their earliest introduction to music. Music is my native language. I read it as intuitively as the words on this page. I hear it in all that I encounter. It feels like a profound gift to share that capacity to know, hear, and communicate the world differently with children and babies. And seeing them find their voices is just so much fun. Even when I might bitch and moan the whole way there about the weight of my equipment, a faulty microphone that's been giving me trouble, or the weather stepping on my toes once again, I virtually always walk out with only one thought: "that was so much fun."

Along with this opportunity to shape young minds came an unexpected and deeply joyful sense of community. Seeing the same faces, not only of children but of the parents and nannies who would bring them, come week after week, and bring their friends, their parents, their partners, their neighbors back with them the next made my classes feel like the meeting point of something larger than itself. While I walked the neighborhood where I teach I began getting shouted out by nannies across the street, asking when they could join a class, or having children approach me in the park, completely outside of class hours, and ask me to sing them a song. For

me, community is rooted in taking care of other people's children and Sing-A-Long Sophie has provided me the opportunity to care for so many.

Perhaps the most profound reason to keep on going was entirely hidden to me at the start. I came into my earliest classes thinking of Sing-A-Long as a day job. A side hustle, to help pay the bills while I kept on waiting and asking and pleading for someone to let me be a *real* professional artist. But as it grew and as I honed my skills and set into something I was really, truly proud to put into the world my understanding of the work evolved. People were paying to hear me make music. Not only that, they were enthusiastically paying to hear me make music. I was paying bills by singing songs. Within a year of launching this sidetrack it is set to become my fulltime income, all from singing songs and daring to find my own place to sing them.

What started as a way to make space for pursuing work as an artist became work as an artist. Work that did not require the filter, stage, or resources of an artistic institution. Work that refused to ask for permission. Work that allowed me to carve out my own avenue, my own path for working, and being, and living as an artist. It is now not a question, not an insecure whispered doubt when I must proclaim what I do or what I am. I'm a musician. I'm an artist. I make my life and my livelihood through my art.

I recently began concluding all of my classes with ABBA's "Thank You for the Music." I almost cringe to hear myself say it, but this song feels like a meditation between myself, the children, and the grown-ups in attendance. It expresses a sentiment I know they feel towards me, if the venmo captions of "thank you for the music," that I frequently receive for class payments are any evidence. It is felt at least as sincerely in return. Thank you for making music my livelihood. Thank you for making me a musician. "I want to sing it out to everybody. What a joy, what a life, what a chance. Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing. Thanks for all the joy

they're bringing. Who can live without it? I ask in all honesty. What would life be? Without a song or a dance, what are we? So I say, thank you for the music, for giving it to me."

Appendix

I greeted you by telling you that this is a story about work. That is where this project began. As someone who proudly claims New York as my home, I have long been intrigued by the workers and jobs that I would consider the backbone of New York: the odd jobs. The non-standard, non-salaried jobs that allow New York to eat and move and live. This class of workers includes the man inside the Mr. Softee truck, the girl behind the deli counter, and the person behind the wheel of a yellow cab. This class of workers also includes myself, an actor/musician/children's performer/piano teacher/freelance social media manager/nanny.

My initial hope was to document a wide swath of workers in this precarious class, but in devising and researching the project more deeply two divergent stories quickly emerged. There are those who view their precarious work as a means to an alternate professional end. These are the actors/nannies, the musicians/servers, the artists and creatives supporting their “real” work with another job in the meantime. Then there are those for whom precarious labor is their “real work,” is their career. These are often immigrants, or children or descendants of immigrants, working the jobs available to them to achieve new ends outside the professional sphere.

To do justice to the story of either I knew I had to choose one narrative to follow. I chose the narrative of the artist and the day job. This story is in many ways my own and belongs to a community of which I am part. I have been drawn to this research through the observation of my own and many of my friends' lives. I am surrounded by fabulously creative people who fill their days as ushers, hosts, web designers, farmers market fish slingers, and innumerable other such posts in the service of building their vision of a rich and fulfilling artistic life. I am simultaneously surrounded by a cultural discourse and young professional class that often

disregards this form of life as impossible, extinct, foolish, or (deeply contrary to the experiences I live and observe) lazy. This is the story that drove me to this project and became the necessary focus of my work.

In approaching this as a story about work, the unique day job became the criterion for inclusion and point of entry for each of my interviews. In defining the “odd jobs” that serve as our entry point, I chose to explore a fairly broad scope of positions with specific intent to represent a diverse array of jobs, from the very mundane to the very strange. The limit on this scope is that the day job must place the narrator on the axis of precarity. While there are certainly artists who pursue their artistic work parallel to a salaried, corporate career, that is outside the scope of this project. I chose to focus specifically on the precarious labor market that sustains the lives of many artists, and thus restricted my definition of “odd jobs” to those that represent a diversion from nine to five, salaried labor practices.

It is also important to my understanding of this project that all of my narrators are artists who work for a living. This means that the odd jobs documented in this project are not merely a hobby, supplementary income, or “fun money” for artists who are primarily supported by familial wealth. Rather, the work documented here is necessary, consequential work. It is the work that pays the rent, the electric bill, the heat, and the groceries. It is the work that allows these artists to live in New York. However, this does not negate the fact that for many, though certainly not all, of the artists who fall into this category, and who are documented in this work, a level of familial financial support may be available as a “safety net” to catch them if they fall. Though not actively propping up their lives as New York artists, the knowledge of this safety net in those for whom it exists can enable the choice to pursue more precarious work over stable employment.

With that being said, it is important that readers of this work enter it with the understanding that for every narrator documented here their work is serious. The work of the day jobs and the income generated from it is necessary for creating and maintaining a living in New York. Without this work we could not be here. Alongside this is the knowledge that the work of artistry is a serious imperative for creating a life in New York. The work of artistry for the artists documented in this project is what creates the purpose, meaning, and community that defines their lives.

My narrators were sourced from within my personal relationships within the New York City arts community. Through personal conversations and a public call posted to my personal social media accounts I spread the word that I was interested in speaking to any artist who has supported their life in New York through precarious day jobs ranging from the most mundane to the most unusual. From these calls and ensuing conversations about the aims of the project and where potential narrators' stories may fit into it, I arrived at the collection of narrators whose stories were presented in this work.

The work of the odd jobs, the work that pays the bills, served as the entry point and guiding framework to our conversations. However, in seriously considering the work of artistry and contextualizing this project within the framework of artistic work in New York City in the contemporary moment this work necessarily became about much more than the odd jobs alone.

Through contextualizing research and an initial test of concept interview with Iman Cooper-Williams Abdul more than a year prior to the completion of this project, I developed an interview practice and list of guiding questions that prioritized self definition and a consideration of how the day job fits into the larger practice of building a life as an artist in this particular

moment of New York City's history. This practice proved to be generative in providing narrators with the space to consider their means of making a living in relation to their lives as artists and the social, cultural, and political forces that shape them.

With interviews completed I strove to maintain the complexity and complete sense of selfhood I witnessed in co-creating these oral histories in the written narratives I created from them. In service of this intent some quotations from the narrators are presented non-linearly. All of the words in quotations were spoken by the narrators and original meaning and intent has been maintained, but edits have been made in service of narrative flow. First and ensuing drafts of the written work were shared with all narrators and I welcomed, though did not require, narrative feedback and a continuation of the practice of co-creation in the drafting of the written project. Not all narrators chose to engage with the written work in this way, but for those who did the feedback largely reflected a sense of appreciation and agency in the narrativization of their stories in this project.

In continuing to serve the contextualization of my narrators' day jobs within the scope of their work and life as artists, I chose to present this work publicly through a showcase at which narrators were invited to perform or present any artistic work of their choosing. This exhibition served as an opportunity to enhance my audience's understanding of the fullness of our lives as laboring artists, while also giving my narrators space to promote and create the work that fuels them. The artists present were able to meet and mingle with each other and the audience, while audience members could read excerpts of the above chapters in the program, inviting them further into the worlds and work of these working artists.

This presentation was also intended to serve as a platform for uninhibited artistic creation on the part of my narrators, an outlet that is all too difficult to find in the current New York arts

landscape. Iman and Brittny performed an in development devised piece about femininity in the church with the full company of STRANGEGIRLZZ, Max shared a first public preview of his upcoming comedy special, and Olivia played the guitar and sang a mix of original work and covers. The narrators who were able to attend expressed gratitude for this space and platform to present their artistry without limitation.

The audience of this initial presentation consisted largely of those who work in the arts or in arts adjacent circles, which was a helpful beta audience for this writing and a welcome audience for the artistry of my narrators. I intend to seek a future public life for this written project with the potential to reach a wider audience outside of those who are already familiar or living within the kinds of practices and lives being explored here. I am currently considering what that future life may look like, in terms of seeking publication or self publishing and sharing this work more widely. It is my sincere hope to provide this work and these narrators' stories with the opportunity to intervene in and engage with the larger cultural dialogues ongoing around arts, labor, and the kind of lives that are possible in the contemporary urban landscape.

A guiding influence for the way these stories are told on these pages is the thesis work of a fellow alumnus of Columbia's Oral History Master of Arts program, Courtney Scott. In her project, *I am [not] your [m]other / "I Am Your Nanny,"* Scott explores the motherwork and lives of New York City nannies, another particular class within New York's precarious labor market. Though focusing thematically on their work, her project centers the total personhood of its narrators and navigates the territory of documenting a type of work and community of which the researcher is a part while centering the voices and stories of external narrators. Scott's work deeply informed my approach to balancing narrators' commentary and insight regarding their labor with narrators' personal histories and the researcher's relationship to the work being

examined. This project was instrumental in developing my conception of how to tell these particular stories of work while rooting them within the grander narratives of my narrators' lives and the context that created them.

In developing the contextual basis in which my narrators' lives in New York are rooted, it became necessary for me to explore the historical entanglement of arts, finance, and the federal government in New York's artistic landscape. Following the financial crisis of the 1970s and subsequent recovery efforts, the arts in New York were transformed into a commercial product. As understood by Sarah Miller-Davenport in "The Cultural Center of the World: Art, Finance, and Globalization in Late Twentieth-Century New York," the invention of New York City as the "cultural center of the world" in post-1970s financial recovery efforts constructed the arts as a commodity marketed towards tourists, fundamentally altering the landscape of artistic creation in New York City and foreclosing upon many of the previously flourishing avenues of creation for New York's artists.

This shift intersected with the influence of federal funding in constructing the "non-profit arts industrial complex." The establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, while on the one hand offering unprecedented federal support for artistic creation, contributed to the institutionalization of American arts industries, concentrated in the large non-profit arts institutions of New York. Sarah Wilbur's *Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts*, considers the process of "dance-making" in this context as a co-creative process between artists, arts institutions, and the political forces holding the purse strings. This conception highlights how "merit based" funding decisions, far from being apolitical or neutral, served to narrowly define what was considered worthy within the American dance institution, limiting that scope to ballet and modern concert dance. Developing this

argument towards the turn of the millennium and twenty first century, the updated policies of the NEA served to construct the arts as a commodity meant to directly generate capital in partnership with other public sectors.

The institutionalization and commercialization of the arts in New York City through the course of the twentieth century is fundamental in understanding the artistic landscape in which my narrators operate. The non-profit theatre industrial complex has come to be such a dominant force within New York theatre it is almost an inescapable gatekeeper for the work that can be produced, shared, and consumed on New York's stages. In constructing art as a saleable product, with a mass market in mind, the financial and governmental forces explored in the aforementioned works have narrowed the scope of what kinds of work artists can afford to make. It is crucial that we understand "theatre-making" and "arts-making," as Wilbur defines "dance-making": political processes by which grantors, political actors, and artists cocreate the work on the artistic landscape. This process of arts-making defines what art is allowed to be made and who is allowed to make a living in the arts.

While the institutions formed in this history remain significant and undeniable players in the state of the arts in New York today, my narrators are speaking from a distinctly different historical moment. These histories track the rise of institutionalized arts as we know them today. We are living within the fall. Since the start of the first Trump administration the NEA has faced existential threats. Threats of total dissolution have been repeatedly floated, as Trump has doled out blow after blow of massive funding cuts to virtually every NEA-supported artistic project in the country. The particular form of arts-making performed within the non-profit arts institutions of the twenty first century is fundamentally reliant on federal funding for its existence and persistence. These federal funding cuts are concurrent with dwindling economic circumstances

and cultural priorities that diminish private donor contributions and ticket sales, leading to the perception by many that these massive institutions may be on the brink of collapse.

Now speaking at the moment of the nonprofit theatre industrial complex's potential dissolution, my narrators are situated to think about how the presence and/or dissolution of this massive institutionalization and funding complex create or foreclose upon the possible lifeways of artists. The stories presented in this project interrogate the necessary shifts in approach to labor and art that artists are experiencing on this shifting landscape, as well as the speculative futures for the arts in New York that they see emerging out of this moment. In examining the past work and forward looking hopes of these working artists, this project is uniquely situated to contribute to the developing history and practice of the process of art-making in New York.

It is my hope that the oral histories created in service of this project can contribute to the historical record of New York City arts and labor. In honoring this intent, as well as my narrators' ownership of their own stories, I chose to employ a creative commons license that allows for non-commercial access and use of the oral histories. In seeking an archival home for the collection it feels clear to me that the stories of this project are for and about New York and thus should reside in it. I have reached out to archivists at the Fales Library and Special Collections at NYU, which hosts a collection centered on the downtown arts scene of New York City, as well as the New York Historical, which hosts a robust archival collection on the history of New York City. I am still awaiting responses from both archives and am continuing to pursue an institutional archival plan that will allow the preservation and access of these oral histories to honor the intent of the project in contributing to this longer history.

This landscape of limited avenues for funded artistic creation is the condition that makes day jobs necessary. In combination with rising instability in contemporary labor markets at large,

this is the financial landscape that requires most artists to make their living outside of their primary artistic pursuits. The question of navigating self definition and artistic identity within a complex labor market that challenges that identity is central to my work. In this consideration Ruth Horowitz's consideration of "identity repair narratives" has served as a valuable tool. Through her sociological research on the work of dancers in *Passionate Work: Choreographing a Dance Career*, Horowitz conceptualizes an "identity repair narrative" as a personal narrative that artists conceive of to reconcile their identity as an artist with their work in something other than their art. Considering the identity repair narratives at play in my narrators' and my own self conceptions was a useful instrument for understanding the way that we construct meaning from our work and the lives we have each built around it.

In considering these labor practices in the contemporary moment it is necessary to examine how they enter into existing dialogues on work in New York. Gig work is increasingly common, not only for artists, but as a primary source of income for non-artists, and as a side hustle for those with more conventional salaried positions. An article published in *The Intelligencer* during the creation of this work notes the rise of many hyphenate creative (and then some) workers, like the Barista-Personal Assistant-Nanny-Actor-Writer-Producer who tells of her nonstop lifestyle. This project enhances the conversation on gig work in the developing labor market of New York through a deep dive into the working realities, labor market choices, and evolving conceptions of work in a small and particular demographic within the gig labor market—precariously employed artists.

This consideration also demands an understanding of the condition of precarity and its social function. In the *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Sharryn Kasmir undertakes an understanding of the social devaluation of precarious lives through the long history of labor that

has lain on the margins of traditional labor practices. While it is important to note that the precarious condition of my narrators is a chosen precarity and does not carry the weight of violence and displacement born by some other classes of precarious laborers, this concept of social devaluation is nonetheless useful. It is my experience and the experience of many of my narrators that the choice to pursue labor practices outside the nine to five schema of contemporary post-grad expectation draws derisive comments or assumptions that this work is “not a real job,” or merely an attempt to avoid the realities of a working adult life, rather than considering this work as a serious alternative path of life building.

The stories told by my narrators and relayed in these pages by me present an alternative reality to this narrative. They present precarious labor practices as a meaningful method for the creation of lives that are both personally fulfilling and in service of the works and worlds they hope to build. Worlds in which art-making can be divorced from the constraints of institutions. Worlds in which we are free to reclaim our time, minds, and souls from the structures meant to contain them. Worlds in which another way of life can be forged.

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