



METRO ARTS

NASHVILLE OFFICE OF ARTS + CULTURE

PUBLIC COMMENT

Metro Art Board of Commissioners

January 20, 2022 12-1:30 p.m.

- A. Call to Order & Welcome
- B. Approval of Minutes: December 16, 2021
- C. Arts in Action
- D. Action Items:
 - 1. Summer 2022 POWER Youth Site Partner Awards

No public comment.

- 2. Metro Arts Strategic Planning Task Force

No public comment.

- E. Public Meetings Requirements Review

No public comment.

- F. Discussion of Metro HR Fact Finders Report

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- G. Executive Director's Report

- H. Adjourn Meeting

Public Comment F.1

Dear Metro Art Board of Directors,

I hope that you all are well, healthy and in warmth as we approach this cold time of the year and as we work through this pandemic. I would like to acknowledge your review of the Metro Factfinder Report, clarify why I am speaking on this matter of racial equity, and to clear my name because I felt that the Factfinder report incorrectly inferred that I was a belligerent and untrustworthy MAC staff member. I apologize for not being with you today. However, I welcome each of you to reach out to me should you have any questions.

I appreciate your careful review of the Factfinder Report and must state in many parts, it lacks significant context. I hope that you have also had an opportunity to review my exit interview, as it adds context regarding my personal experience at MAC.

I found certain parts of the report and the process by which this report was produced concerning. I have reached out to Keven Palmissano who conducted the research to address these concerns. He has clarified his position and shared that he will be sharing my responses. However I would like to exercise the right to add to the public record regarding the Metro HR Factfinder report and address this body directly. I am giving context and more details to several items in the Factfinder report, though I will not go into full depth about every incident, I now clarify those points.

Remote Work in New York

I had planned a trip to New York and caught a flight after work on Thursday night so that I could be in New York and settled to work remotely on Friday. I was approved to work remotely on Fridays. I live outside of Davidson county, so me being locally remote was never an issue. There was nothing in the remote work policy that stated that I needed to approve my remote location. So, I didn't even consider requesting to work from New York and only shared in passing as I was checking in and meeting with Caroline. Just like every remote work day, I developed and completed my work plan with no issues while working remotely in New York. Once I learned that this was frowned upon after being coached, I never worked remotely while out of state again.

Concerning the statement about being barred from library and citizen complaint

I was barred from the library for 90 days because I, and friends of mine (who can verify my account), were victims of a documented racial discrimination incident and I lost my temper (re: email regarding "history of angry outbursts"). The email that mentioned the incident was from a gentleman who was racially trolling me and other members of the arts community (one of which who was and is currently on the Public Art Committee). I never threatened the aforementioned gentleman or anyone. These are two scenarios that lacked context and were being used unbeknownst to me, without full context, to strategize potential punitive actions against me. This was a clear cultural misunderstanding because I cannot imagine that any of

my white superiors have had to manage, or have their job threatened due to, race-based incidents like these. The fact that the incident is called without context in a publicly accessible report as if this could have been a punitive action is a racial injustice.

Concerning the statement “Ms. Fitzgerald contacted an insurance company pretending to be one of the Metro artists associated with the agency.”

I was managing the Madison Public Art Project when the lead artist (a black male who also had no prior public art experience; Metro Arts’s first Black public art commission awardee) and I were on a three way call (that he initiated) with his insurance company and I assisted him in answering some of the questions about the Public Art process so that he can acquire his insurance. The artist can verify this call. There were several frustrations that were shared with me about the artist on this project, including him not having his insurance on schedule. To remedy this, the artist and I decided it was best that I assist him with the information via a three way call. I was excited when I shared the information with Caroline about having helped answer questions for the artist and helping him secure his insurance and when I received negative feedback I felt like this was yet another circumstance of being misunderstood. For the sake of public record, this situation now comes back up as a moment that could have been weaponized against me. I definitely was misunderstood in this circumstance as well, since I was assisting with consent from the artist. However, I was coached by Caroline about this call and since then, I had used more caution when coaching artists and steered clear of being as involved with helping them reach certain milestones within their projects.

Regarding the claim that I escalated situations:

If leadership had an issue with how I communicated, they should have told me and we could have had a discussion about it. We could have come to an understanding had we discussed it. I would have been open to receiving coaching, per usual. But, this was never addressed indirectly or directly. Feedback that I normally received from my colleagues was that I was a “ray of sunshine”, approachable and easy to talk to. If leadership witnessed an action, it should have been addressed, but it was never discussed with me and I didn't hear about it until the decision was made to extend my PIP and subsequently coach me out. (Although the fact finder suggests different). My immediate supervisor (Janine) was not present during the incident named in the report to be able to effectively coach and reflect around the misunderstanding. Because to this day, I still feel as if I was trying to focus and help the artist in the moment, since he had shared new information with me about his presentation as we were walking into the presentation that he had, seemingly, not shared with other staff prior to that moment. I genuinely wanted the artist to succeed, so admittedly I was a bit frustrated. Not with the artist, but that the situation and process clearly did not set him up for success and wondering what I could have done better to help him.

I would also like to note that this is also during the period of time where I was on the initial inflated PIP that had action steps that I was to adhere to that had nothing to do with the reason I was put on a PIP in the first place. I felt heavily and unjustly scrutinized but I

continued because I believed in the work and I felt as if I should see the humanity in my colleagues through this process.

To be made out to be belligerent and to escalate occurrences beyond proportion when I was the one often brokering relationships that the agency is still leveraging is absurd. When I stated, "I am an artist, producer, and cultural strategist at the intersection of civic space and social justice...Once upon a time these conflicts were perceived as assets to the organization but with the shift of leadership and supervision, I felt they became liabilities" these are examples of relationships and relationship brokering that became liabilities. Please reach out to the THRIVE artists that I have worked with. Please reach out to community members that I have had to ask not to give up and to keep trying for funding that might seem entirely too impossible to achieve. Please talk to the community about how culturally micro aggressive people on Metro Arts' staff have been to them and how the passionate Black women who were previously employed at Metro Arts helped to mend relationships between the agency and the community.

Is any of that documented (aside from the community awards and nominations I received)?

No, but you can ask artists and other community stakeholders without coercion. It is unjust to be made to look belligerent and untrustworthy when:

- The THRIVE audit from the years that I managed the program was the cleanest audit at the agency

- I was able to leverage my reputation and experience in this field to start my own company, be appointed as a director for a national cultural arts leadership program, and appointed as a director of local non-profit by which I was on the board of for four years

- I am trusted enough to hold 3 local and national board positions

It's absurd to make my character or reputation anything other than what it is, someone who is not perfect but is passionately effective at bridging the gap between culture, community, policy, and public discourse with warmth, love, and transparency.

Regarding the Conflict of Interest

I would like to further reiterate that it was never my intention to hide the fact that my then partner was applying for funding. I had shared his name and the application with the staff fully knowing that they would know who he was. It is also important to mention that we had developed strategies to remove my role from the THRIVE funding selection process because I was coaching each and every application that came through the agency. Because of this, my role on the selection panel as a whole was an inherent conflict of interest. I had been dating this person for a little under 3 months and I was prepared to recuse myself in any way in which I needed to, beyond the strategies that we had already built into the process. At this point, we had implemented a staff panel selection process and a community panel selection process where my roles were to be the outreach coordinator, application coach, panel facilitator and the person who reported on and for the THRIVE program. When I was initially asked about the scenario I responded with complete transparency and this can be verified by Janine. Yes I sent the email after I was approached about the scenario. It was then brought to my attention that

it would be a conflict. So I emailed Ian and Caroline to inform them about the scenario for guidance and clarity. To suggest anything different than me offering transparency around this scenario is absurd. The fact is I was honest and transparent the entire time and the application in question was pulled prior to staff and community panels. Why did Caroline then feel the need to let me know she “could fire me right now” and to initiate the inflated PIP when, for all intents and purposes, the situation was remedied, and the conflict of interest policy was clarified and understood by me, is still confusing and concerning.

Upon exiting my Factfinder interview with Keven Palmissano he asked if I would have done anything different during my time at the arts commission. I was unclear about what that would be then, but I am clear now that I would not have let my willingness to see the humanity of my colleagues cloud my judgement which prevented me from questioning and documenting every microaggression, and cultural misunderstanding, and stopped me from challenging their perception of my unprofessionalism. I am trusted within our greater community and I should have challenged that mischaracterization at every occurrence and not sign off on any subjective criticism of my work that is rooted in unilateral bias. I would have challenged the organization to seek out processes of criticism and create organizational human relation policies that are rooted in exploration, restoration, and growth.

Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me through social media for my email information should you like to reach out. My aim is that real transformation be had through a clear plan of action and reform; that includes more than Metro Leadership and Metro DEI training. This circumstance needs a real introspective look at how this was allowed to happen seemingly unbeknownst to this commission body. This transformation should include policy shifts so that my experience of microaggressive othering is not duplicated should Metro Arts hire any more Black staff members or staff members that identify with systematically oppressed cultures.

Sincerely,

Lauren Fitzgerald | Neighbor, Friend and Servant Leader

Public Comment F.2

To Metro Arts Commissioners, Metro Human Resources, CARE team, and other interested parties;

I'm writing to encourage you to look into the practices and policies around time, worker compensation, comp time, PIP process and hiring with an experienced antiracist analysis and lens. While the fact finders were respectful and thorough, it should disturb us all that the practices that creates such a toxic and psychologically violent environment that forces faithful employees out who love their work are within the bounds of Metropolitan Nashville Government policy. An experienced antiracist practitioner would ask questions about power, how it is wielded, who is being harmed, and how to repair the harm.

I encourage you all to listen to the interviews with Metro HR as they are a matter of public record. I would like to point your attention to questions I was not asked in my interviews about specific times of absence or tardiness. The first PIP was cited as December 2018. Metro Arts was in the habit of capitalizing on my public speaking gifts and ability to forge relationships. I had accrued comp time for speaking engagements on Metro Arts' behalf in the fall of that year, while my grandmother was actively dying and had died in December 2018. My supervisor, ED and HR coordinator were all aware are all of these things and were pressuring me to use the extra hours that I worked. The second thing I'll point your attention to in the fact-finder report is March 2019 that sited tardiness or leaving early. That month, the Racial Equity in Arts Leadership program along with Curb Center at Vanderbilt University executed a national symposium. I had accrued comp time from the 45 and sometimes 50 hour or more work weeks and was being told to use those hours. I notified my supervisor of those times through slack or text message or in person. Any other questions you might have — will be in the interviews with the team at Metro HR.

Again, I urge you to look through these practices as the toxicity and harm have continued after my departure, and be intentional about your antiracist analysis. As you know, Crossroads defines racism as racial prejudice plus the misuse of power. Institutional racism is when our private beliefs about race, whether conscious or unconscious, determine the decisions, resources, policies and practices in our society. Dr. Ibram Kendi defines antiracism as shifting harmful policy through action. I urge you all to listen, read, and act. Too many talented people have come through Metro Arts, and too many talented have been and are being "coached out of their positions."

Lastly, I am still grateful for my time at Metro Arts. It taught me about the very good that the power of local government can wield on behalf of ordinary citizens and our community. It is still my hope that Metro Arts will do the work that its mission requires.

All the best, Cecilia Olusola Tribble

Public Comment F.3

Janine Christiano
Strategic Funding and Initiatives Manager
Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts + Culture
1417 Murfreesboro Pike Nashville, TN 37217
615-862-6720
janine.christiano@nashville.gov

Dear Metro Arts Commissioners,

I am writing in response to the recently released reports related to the allegations of a hostile work environment, racial discrimination, and poor leadership at Metro Arts. Throughout the reports, the Human Resources representatives who wrote the article stated that there were “no violation(s) of (Metro HR) rules, policies, or laws.” I encourage you to engage deeply with our agency’s [commitment to equity](#) and review the situations in light of those commitments, before making the Commission’s suggestions for follow-up actions. Metro Arts has made specific commitments to equity above what is legally required in order to bring about impactful, positive change and to stop the perpetuation of inequitable systems and practices. This is a strength of the agency. For this, we have received additional funding, commendation, and recognition.

In my opinion, the reports are skewed and incomplete. I highly encourage the Arts Commission to work with its Committee for Antiracism and Equity (CARE) and the Metro Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to find a suitable third party consultant to complete an independent and comprehensive investigation, perform an equity audit for the agency, and provide actionable steps so the agency can move forward.

To move forward successfully, I believe it is necessary for the Arts Commission to commit to actions that will:

- restore trust with people of color in the community
- create safeguards to prevent future harm and marginalization within the agency and in the community
- reaffirm the agency’s commitment and accountability to diverse communities in Nashville

Specifically, I encourage the Arts Commission to:

- Hire a [qualified third party consultant](#) in DEI

- Implement specific equity accountability standards for leadership based on Metro Arts Equity Statement with appropriate consequences
- Interrogate the use and effect of [PIPs](#) within the agency and implement more honest and effective methods to either [coach or discipline](#) as needed
- Engage in open, honest, and comprehensive discussions about Metro Arts' historic and current racial equity practices (internal and external to the agency)
- Be honest about harm caused and do what is needed to repair and restore relationships based on feedback from those harmed

If additional training and education are recommended, the Commission should require commitment to the practice of antiracism by leaders and staff. It is not the training but commitment and the choice to practice that is lacking at Metro Arts. Metro Arts Senior management have engaged in several years of training and have access to a multitude of equity resources.

I am also writing to let you know I have filed my own complaint based on my specific experiences (see attached). My complaint and supporting materials support the initial allegations of a hostile work environment, racial discrimination, and poor leadership at Metro Arts. It is my hope that Metro Arts is able to reflect, transform, and thrive after this experience. Metro Arts has the potential to be a model of what other agencies can do to recover and heal after properly addressing its shortfalls if it can commit to this work.

Thank you,

Janine Christiano