

OUR VALUES, PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH, AND UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

There is a long history of discourse in the United States around issues of difference, who deserves to be fully human, and the quality of that human experience. While many of the variables and dynamics continue to change over time, many key markers of these conversations remain the same. As a result, artEquity comes to these conversations with practices and clear politics for how we engage.

As you prepare to join this conversation for the first time or continue it, we offer these ideas about our values, philosophical approach, and underlying assumptions for you to consider:

artEquity is not a panacea

The artEquity training that you will experience is not a container that has the ability to address all of the compelling issues of our current moment. We will not have enough time to discuss the important and deep histories of the construction and deployment of many of our social categories (i.e., class, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status) and many other key concepts. There are no quick fixes. No one training experience can cover the wide body of work and varied terrain of structural/systemic oppression. You may be disappointed by all that will be left unsaid. What we hope to do, however, is share a framework with you that might be helpful as a part of your ongoing self-analysis and practice as a creative artmaker.

We have a finite amount of time together

We acknowledge up front that given the complexity of the topic and the finite amount of time we have together, you may not be able to express all that comes up for you in the training; you may not be able to share all that you would like to share. We invite you to manage your own expectations—be patient with yourself and others. These conversations started long ago and will continue long into the future. There is no end date; there is no end.

Allow yourself to be a participant

We want to encourage you to allow yourself to be a participant. Even though you may be familiar with training, facilitating, or teaching large groups, this will be your time to be fully present as a participant. We encourage you to allow someone else to hold the space for dialogue.

There is a continuum of lived experiences

There is a continuum of lived experience and understanding of these issues and concepts. Some of you have been dealing with oppressive systems and structures every day of your life (and are, in fact, dealing with them at this very moment) and are emotionally exhausted. Some of you, understandably, feel a sense of urgency and struggle to remain patient with yet one more conversation. Others of you may be unaware of some of the concepts we will explore together and are still questioning the relevance of some of these topics. We know that a range of experiences will be present in these conversations. We believe strongly that there is value in these differing perspectives and that all of us will have an opportunity to learn and grow.

We are operating within a US context

The context we are working from is the current colonized (and colonizing) moment inside the United States. While your work may take you to many places outside the United States, our conversation is rooted in the settler-colonized territory of the United States, its history, and its current ideology.

We feel that some of the dynamics here in the United States, while certainly not universal, may connect with experiences that others have had outside of the United States. We also know that the United States is an effective transmitter of colonial, socioeconomic, hetero-norming, race-based, gender-exclusionary practices and beliefs. We feel that while a US perspective is limited, it is also the cultural context that we are all currently learning from and living within, even if temporarily. We think it may be helpful (and for us it is necessary) to anchor these conversations within a US context.

No person, process, or institution is perfect

Some of us come to these conversations (with institutions and individuals) looking for deficits, and we find them. We will always find them because they will always exist. The question is not, “*Are there* contradictions between our values and our actions?” Rather, the question is: “*How big is the gap* between our values and our actions, and how do we continue to reconcile inconsistencies?”

At any given moment, each of us will have the potential to be right, *very* right, and even self-righteous. And yet, we will still need to build and bridge community. What comes after being right? How do we work together? After years of doing this work, we have learned that the benefits of being right are limited; however, the benefits of building and sustaining community are long lasting.

No person, process, or institution is perfect. However, we can all work to establish shared values and hold each other accountable. And when others fail us, as they almost certainly will, we can exercise the grace that we hope others will afford us when we inevitably falter.

The importance of race

We do not believe that race is the only issue impacting our lives; however, we believe it is attached to all of the issues impacting our lives. We believe it is the foundation upon which all other identities are bolstered, given agency, reinforced with privilege and power, or denied that privilege and power. Race in the United States is salient, intractable, and plainly marked on the body. One’s *skin experience*¹ and the *epidermal character of race*² are unmistakable and more relevant than ever.

¹ Hall, Katori, “[Playwright Reacts to the White Casting of Mountaintop](#),” *The Root* (Nov. 9, 2015). In Katori Hall’s notable response to a white man playing the role of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in her play *The Mountaintop*, she states: “What I have committed to is visually articulating a certain *skin experience*. Black writers dedicated to using black bodies, who remain at the center of a devalued narrative, are committing a revolutionary act. We are using theater to demand a witnessing. Our experiences have been shaped by a ragged history, and dark skin has proved to be a dangerous inheritance. From Eric Garner to the Charleston Nine to the latest black girl slammed to the ground by a cop, our bodies have been used as a battlefield where the Civil War has mutated and continues to claim the lives of those who should have been freed from the sharp knife of racism centuries ago.”

² [Fanon, Frantz. \(1967\) *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press Inc.](#) pg. 13.

We feel that it is impossible to be unracialized or to be a “non-raced” person in the United States. One can be racially unaware and still experience the effects of racial disparities. One can desire race neutrality and still participate in racial bonding. One can be racially ambiguous and, precisely for that reason, still receive lighter-skin privilege. One can “not see race” and still be racially profiled. The racializing and classifying process in the United States is rigorous, reliable, and does not need our permission. It will function *in spite of* and *because of* us. Racialization is backed up by legal systems, institutions, social structures, familial ties, and history. The racializing process begins at birth and is maintained throughout one’s lifetime. From birth certificate to death certificate, one acquires a racial designation and is classified without advance notice or choice.

Because race is worn plainly on the body, is inescapable, and frequently profiled and/or policed, it is the essential underpinning of one’s analysis of power. As we discuss and share foundational concepts, race will be a key element. We see race as the lens through which all other identities must be viewed.

We operate from the original definition of intersectionality

We support Kimberlé Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality, a term she first coined in 1989 to explain the specific form of discrimination and erasure experienced by Black women. As a Black feminist critical race theorist, she asserted that the racism she experienced was gendered, and the sexism she experienced was racialized. Therefore, any remedy required a solution that would address both issues simultaneously. While her original theory began as an exploration of the marginalization of Black women, it has expanded to include other social identities and address the overlapping ways that oppression lands on the “double or triple marginalized,” as well as the complexity of each person’s identity and lived experience.

However, as the use of the term has expanded, it has sometimes been co-opted and used to stymie the addressing of structural racism, which undermines the original intent. We are mindful to neither essentialize or erase any particular identities while always referencing Crenshaw’s foundational wisdom.

The use of affinity groups

We value affinity spaces as an essential organizing tool. Affinity groups are for people who self-identify as part of an identity group that has been historically marginalized. Because members of historically excluded groups are often asked to educate and protect the comfort of those with privilege, affinity spaces are necessary in equity-based work to interrupt those power dynamics and allow for conversations that would not otherwise occur. Affinity groups can support their members by decreasing isolation, deepening consciousness around a particular issue/area, and/or galvanizing members toward action. In our training, artEquity uses race-based affinity groups, but other groups are active and encouraged. Additional information regarding affinity spaces can be found in this resource packet.

We see art as a tool for social change

We see the potential of artists and the arts to be a tool for social change. We do not believe art is neutral, abstract, an individual endeavor, or solely for aesthetics. We believe the arts are one of the most powerful ideological apparatuses that inform and create culture, mores, and what becomes known as “truth.” Therefore, we believe art makers have a profound role and responsibility in upholding the values of social justice. While behavior may be policed, sanctioned, or legislated, attitudes can only be changed through empathy, community building, and an exchange of love. The arts are a gateway to accessing the heart. We believe art has the power to quietly transform. Because of this, art makers have a serious responsibility in shaping and influencing the world around them.

Difficult work can be filled with joy

We will be dealing with serious topics, hard topics, challenging topics, but this difficult work can also be filled with joy; and, in fact, it must be filled with joy. So you will be invited to laugh, breathe, and also enjoy yourself in this process. Your joy will not diminish the seriousness of our task; on the contrary, it will make the difficult work possible.