

Artists as ‘Creative Problem-Solvers’ at City Agencies



Taja Lindley, who will spend the next year doing an unconventional residency — with New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, working on a project on birth outcomes and maternal mortality. Jim Tripp

By **Sophie Haigney**

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Taja Lindley, a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary artist and activist, will spend the next year doing an unconventional residency — she’ll be collaborating with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, working on a project that deals with unequal birth outcomes and maternal mortality for pregnant and parenting black people in the Bronx.

Ms. Lindley is one of four artists who were selected this year for the City’s [Public Artists in Residence program](#), or PAIR, which is managed by New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs. The program, which began in 2015, matches artists and public agencies, and the artists are tasked with developing creative projects around social issues.

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Ms. Lindley will be working with the [Tremont Neighborhood Health Action Center](#), part of the department of health, in the Bronx. “People who are black are met with skepticism, minimized and dismissed when they seek health care,” Ms. Lindley said, “and the voices of black people can really shift medical practices and city practices, so I’ll really be centering those voices.” She said that performance, film and storytelling are likely to be incorporated in her project.

The other three artists selected this year are the artist Laura Nova, who will be in residence with the Department for the Aging; the artist Julia Weist, who will be in residence with the Department of Records and Information Services; and the artist Janet Zweig, who will be in residence with the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability. Each will receive \$40,000. There is a three-month-long research phase and then the artists will spend a minimum of nine months creating and producing their work.

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“The mission is really to bring the creative energy and intelligence of artists to challenges facing city agencies,” said Tom Finkelpearl, the city’s cultural affairs commissioner. Mr. Finkelpearl started this program in 2015, inspired in part by the [decades-long unsalaried residency](#) that the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles did with the Department of Sanitation.

Ms. Lindley has worked with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene before, as a sexual and reproductive justice consultant. She led a community-based process to create the [New York City Standards for Respectful Care at Birth](#).

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“As an artist-activist, you’re railing, you’re talking, you’re making work and hoping it has an impact, to have the ear of a space that can really make a difference from a systemic point of view,” Ms. Lindley said of the match, “that’s really exciting.”

The department is eager to have her, too. “We’re a whole set of public health workers here in the Bronx that are trying to tackle issues around birth equity and reproductive justice, and we typically do that in a very data-focused way and can get very cornered in by that,” said Jane Bedell, the assistant commissioner and medical director for the Center for Health Equity’s Bronx Neighborhood Health Action Center. “Artists can be creative problem-solvers.”

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