



Workshop at UDK Berlin. A student climbs through the window after exploring a protest against advertising on the school building by Coca Cola. At this time the Bologna process was being introduced at the school and students were organizing against it. I was paid to be a visiting workshop organiser.



The kitchen of an apartment in Herne Hill, London. I share the tenancy with one other person. The apartment is approximately 970 pounds per month.



Windows I covered in an apartment in Berlin that I rented for one month, in the summer of 2006, from an artist who recently bought it at an auction.



Composting unit built by students at the Art Academy in Tromsø, 2007 where I was paid to be a workshop organiser for one week.

## WORKING ARTISTS IN THE GREATER ECONOMY

Marina Vishmidt

‘...one of the most important experiences of our times is the fact that we are unable to have any experience of it. The result is a permanent criticism that is blind to the crisis, and a permanent crisis that is deaf to criticism. In short, a perfect harmony!’ Boris Buden, ‘Criticism without Crisis: Crisis without Criticism’\*

For the past however many years, I’ve been looking into the ‘speculative mode of production’, that is, ways of valuing labour which disavow its character as labour. Art is the primary site of investigation, inasmuch as art is supposed to be the opposite of labour, typically behaving more like a luxury commodity in the market or an investment of love in the studio or community. But are these cordons still so sanitary, given the proximity of art and labour via the promulgation of creativity and voluntary effort as the watchword for all kinds of work, while the distinctiveness of wage labour itself starts to blur in a climate of debt-fuelled proximity work and finance? It could be said that the speculative mode of production is not based on the generalization of creativity but on the confusion about how and where to extract surplus-value. Thus we observe a generalization of ‘de-valorisation’ rather than of ‘self-valorisation’ as a notionally post-capitalist economic or political trend. This is what links the precarity of the artistic mode of

production and the conditions for most other work, as they’re both subsumed by financialised regimes of accumulation. It is more a generalization of non-value, of fictitious capital, than some idealized ‘creativity’ – the only way we can speak about creativity here is that assigned to the frictionless multiplication of money, the normativity of capital’s own growth pattern of self-valorising value extended to all human life.

W.A.G.E.† make the point that artists are structurally and subjectively reproduced as speculators in the market since their work is not remunerated with a wage. This gives them a direct interest in the fortunes of capital which wage workers don’t have. In a situation where everyone is supposed to be a speculator, ‘investing’ in themselves no matter what they do, what are the consequences not just for the critical status of art in relation to the capitalist whole, but to the status of the labour that happens in art? Does it get closer to industrialized forms of labour, i.e. more like all other kinds of work? Does the turn to services as a mimetic genre since the 60s and most visibly in the recent ‘relational aesthetics’ and ‘socially engaged’ practices also herald a final loss of distinction between artistic labour and non-artistic labour, or does it mark the subsumption of labour under art as a regime of speculation and abstraction just as it has been subsumed under finance? Is this the sign of a ‘primitive accumulation’ of other social practices undertaken by art, or does art just mediate ‘primitive accumulation’ happening elsewhere?

Further, what happens when the sources of surplus-value for the self-valorising value of art and of finance start to dry up, that is, when unemployment is the order of the day? If the boom years of the past decade poised art as the form of social services expedient to creative neoliberalism, with funding disbursed at the same time as cuts to the welfare budget, austerity sees them both as expendable. Does it not clarify that culture is part of welfare on the one hand, and that this

can be politically dramatized or used in an emancipatory or at least a critical way on the other? In the same way as defending the public sector, or cultural budgets within the public sector these days can be a radical programme insofar as it entails asking for more, not agreeing to less out of shame at a dubious and relatively poorly-funded privilege created by exactly that mode of production and exploitation about which many artworld actors entertain a perfunctory scepticism? Perhaps. Yet the rational core of the opportunism that is by and large the practical horizon of existence for most cultural projects these days is that the moment for demanding things from the state has passed, and another way of conceiving any notion of ‘the public good’ has yet to take its place, much less the political means to institute it.

Given this collapse in the social reproduction or recognition of culture, we should focus a bit more tightly on the practical criticism of value performed by labour in the sphere of art. The art sphere has a problematic relationship to the commodity not only at the level of the

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artwork, but at the level of labour. Most art institutions run on voluntary labour, as do most art practices. This is labour which is not reimbursed and is thus objectively judged (i.e., by funding structures) as non-commodifiable, often also by those who perform it. This accords with the specifically ‘useless’ status

assigned to art in capitalism’s social division of labour, since commodities which do not find a price are socially useless – see Marx when he says ‘If a thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value.’ Here it’s not only the matter of the ‘absolute commodity’ which is the artwork that bears no use-value whatever and is thus free in some important way in a world pinioned by the law of value (Adorno); here we’re thinking about the commodity labour-power which does not find a price in the sphere of art production thus is useless. And thus it is free: it is important to note what desires and privileges are capitalized or even just mobilized in the institution of unpaid artistic labour; people work for free because they find it less alienating than another kind of work which might be paid, though usually that other kind of work cannot be wholly avoided for survival reasons. The prevalence of free labour in art-related spheres has to do with art’s constitutive ideological opposition to labour as such (as well as more humdrum mechanisms of supply and demand). The economy of art, that part of it which positions itself somewhere not in ‘the market’, is understood to operate with other kinds of exchange than monetary, and to be producing other kinds of value. Hence people who would never work for free in a regular job consent to unpaid opportunities in the art-related sphere because it’s not work, in fact, what better proof could there be that it wasn’t work than the fact that’s not paid? Here we must distinguish between work and alienated labour, since the above instinctively conflates them, separating them out again in ‘artwork’ – payment is considered a corollary to alienated labour, compensation for it in some way, as much as a ‘valuing’ of this labour, while art is done for its own sake, and its labour is somehow unquantifiable. Art is art and labour is labour, but only art has the privileges of testing out forms of activity which could obtain in a world where they are not separate: ‘the status of art as a space for the



Composition made in studio at IASPIS in Stockholm, where, on a residency in 2008, I was given an apartment, studio and money to live for 6 months.



Cladding on a building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, photographed as part of a series of images for an exhibition.



Desk space in a room that I rented in Manhattan for 9 months in 2008/09 for \$800 per month.



The seminar room at the Whitney Independent Study Programme with adjustments to furniture. The WISP has been running for

40 years and is funded by private donors. Participants spend one year at the institution and pay between \$500 and \$900 for twice-weekly seminars and a studio space in Chinatown, in NY. I attended the programme in 2008/09.



A bicycle lent to me by my roommate in Manhattan, 2008. A bicycle lent to me by my roommate in Manhattan, 2008.



A desk at a press conference for an exhibition in Barcelona in 2008. I was paid an artist fee of almost 2000 GBP. The desk became part of my work for the exhibition.



A beehive cared for by two friends in Holyoke, Massachusetts.



Studio space at Whitney Independent Study Programme, shared with 2 others.

\* in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (eds), MayFlyBooks: London and mayflybooks.org, 2009, p. 41.

† W.A.G.E. works to draw attention to inequalities that exist in the arts, and how to resolve them. wageforwork.com

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Post lunch, whilst at Whitney Independent Study Programme.



Action made at the corner of Elizabeth and Prince Street in New York, 2009.



Roof repairs made to a building in Braddock, Pennsylvania. The roof needed replacing and the first stage of replacing the rafters took about 10 days with a group of 4 friends from NYC, 2009.



Laundry drying rack at the apartment in Herne Hill, London, 2010.



Bloomberg-sponsored education area at Tate Modern, London, 2010.

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de-functionalization of subjectivities: singularities emerge there emancipated from any utility. As a purely aesthetic space, the world of art harbours a potential critique of the general organization of society, and of the organization of work in particular.’ (Claire Fontaine). Here the point has to be that even while art is a function of inoperativity, as CF argues, it is also the case that labour registers in art as a disruption of its own social and aesthetic consistency. If for no other reason, this is why the question of labour continues to have a valence for self-reflexive or socially critical art practices.

The practical estrangement from commodity relations tends to materialize as unpaid labour in the art world. And this anomalous performance grounds its preconditions – because unpaid labour is so abundant and accepted, institutional budgets frequently don’t cost for it. This is especially the case in discursive or public-art practices or projects; when there is no discernible relation to the art market, the work is not valued – that is, the art market is the only existing metric whereby art can be valued, even by public funding. So art produced under such auspices exists perforce outside the market economy, regardless of its makers’ views on the commodity-form. Would it then be more radical to insist that all artistic practice is labour, and that this labour-power

find a price, if only because of the fact that art is not considered labour and is not paid for unless it finds a price in the art market? This would tend to impose a certain kind of ‘capitalism’ on the feudal structures of the artworld. If not always recognizing labour through the wage, they would have to adopt mechanism of rent, getting them to price ‘knowledge production’ like the academy or industrial R&D departments do. This would also countervail the unlimited exploitation characteristic of the art sphere as prototype for all waged labour under conditions of economic crisis (affect over money). Finally, it would acknowledge the fact that not everyone is unpaid in the economics of art, tackling the unlovely issue of distribution. So learning to ask for artistic labour to be reimbursed through either wages or rent seems equitable, since barring a society-wide revolutionary challenge to commodification, it is reactionary to hold up artistic labour as not-labour. Under capitalist conditions all work should be priced the same way.

This is the pragmatic-political level W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) are operating at. On this level at least, the philosophical or critical distinctions between art and labour, the ‘aesthetic relations of production’ or art’s status as both a commodity and not a commodity are otiose. That is, the question of how labour in the field of art is to be valued has everything to do with those things, but the resistance to the commodity cannot be enacted in working for free when things cost money. Real conditions of exploitation demand capitalist social relations like the wage be transvalued, and sometimes reinforced, when it is the exceptions to them which help to cement their grip. In proposing that artists and artworkers get paid as a matter of course, W.A.G.E. sometimes identify as workers, seeking to cut the tie with the artist as speculator in her own work, transfixed by the movements of the market like the financiers whose gifts make the museums go round. W.A.G.E. define artistic work as the provision of ‘cultural

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value’ to society which should be recognized by ‘capital value’; paid in money rather than non-exchangeable forms of currency such as ‘exposure’, ‘prestige’ or any of the usual ways of phrasing the question mark that art labours under. This has been known to raise eyebrows, especially in Europe where the critical pre-set demurs at such connotations as too market-friendly. But to my mind, the eyebrow misses the point. It seems more like an ironic strategy of over-identification intended to highlight the absurdity of a class of workers in capitalism who are paid in recognition rather than money; freedom from work paradoxically resulting in absolute dependency on the charity of patrons, institutions, and yes, successful speculators. Asking for a wage for artists’ work (in the form of fees in budgets, etc) is already highlighting the incredibly problematic nature of considering artistic production in line with any other kind of work in capitalism. It is a paradox which can genuinely prompt political thinking as well as being a narrow reformist

demand. I would tendentially compare this to the historical instance of the 1970s Wages for Housework campaign; where the question of a wage for what is constitutively supposed to be out of sight and out of mind for capital – domestic labour and reproduction done out of love – shows the dependence of capitalism on the violation of the law of value in its dependence on unpaid labour. The driving idea of WfH was that in order to destroy the relations of production as they are, founded on the exchange relation with capital in the form of the wage, everything should be re-defined as labour since all labour is waged and then supposedly capitalism would crack under the strain. This is perhaps the chief example that

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comes to mind of a materialist feminist politics that set out to directly challenge the relations of production from the standpoint of value. It’s also one of the clearest examples in this branch of feminism of trying to apply capitalist logic against capital, and thus seems directly relevant for thinking about W.A.G.E.. I have written more extensively elsewhere on the problematic aspects of the campaign at the time and now, none of which didn’t have a dialectical underside, summed up perhaps in the title of an essay from the time by one of its main activists, Silvia Federici: ‘Wages Against Housework’.

Marina Vishmidt: Paolo Virno has recently said ‘Nowadays artistic labour is turning into wage labour while the problem is, of course, how to liberate hum



A fire in the forest clearing at the Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks. The Blue Mountain Center has a residency programme for artists, writers and activists. I was there for 2 weeks during 2010. All accommodation and food was paid for. The residency is supported by a private foundation.



A studio at the Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks.



Materials from the Women’s Archive Bolzano. After researching at the Archive I found some collections of newspaper articles that highlighted changing attitudes to women and their occupation of public space in the city. I was in Bolzano as part of Critical Complicities, a project curated by Lisa Mazza and Julia Moritz, 2010.



Paper document storage at Cinenova offices in London. Cinenova is a women’s film and video distributor that I volunteer for with eight other people.



Monitor depicting a video by the Disabled Women’s Theatre collective from the 1980s. The video is viewed by a visitor to the exhibition Reproductive Labour at The Showroom in London. Reproductive Labour was an exhibition project by Cinenova in early 2011.



Poster on the outside of a space in Soho, Manhattan, 2011. The space is called ‘We Work’ and is a combination of office space and café, where members can come to work, hold meetings and have their mail delivered.



Danish daily newspaper covers the story of a workers’ struggle in the Philippines. I printed this image for an exhibition in Copenhagen in 2010.



The household chores schedule for a household of students in Aarhus, Denmark. I was paid as a visiting workshop organiser and went on excursions to the places where students live in Aarhus during the week I was there.



Equipment cupboard at the Contemporary Art Museum, Roskilde, Denmark, 2011. The Museum currently has an exhibition entitled Trauma 1-11 which was organised with the now closed Copenhagen Free University, of which I took part (or was a part of/ member of).



Studio at IASPIS in Stockholm. I am trying to make photos for a magazine where I hold a large piece of cloth at the window.



Bed at the apartment I rented in Manhattan 2008/09.

[Interview continues]

an activity in general from the form of wage labour? While this is a reference not to artistic labour per se, and the ways it is economically or theoretically valued, but to the increasingly 'creative' ideological component of all kinds of exploitation, this does bring in the question of the wider political horizon within which the pragmatic demand for the institutional recognition of artistic labour through artist fees should be situated. While the demand itself is hard to disagree with, in the present context capital is trying to get out of paying anyone, which is part of the reason artistic labour is used as a model for limitless (self-) exploitation. The history of Wages for Housework can also be a reference here, though it was formulated at a time of a strong welfare state compared to today. But that can stay as a backdrop for now.

## “Capital is trying to get out of paying anyone, which is part of the reason artistic labour is used as a model for limitless (self-) exploitation

The question for W.A.G.E. would be whether the current post-crash economic and political climate has influenced the idea of W.A.G.E. as a 'capitalist project' – in the times of a 'jobless recovery', mass unemployment, attacks on the public sector and soaring profits, getting paid for your labour seems far from essential to capitalism. Can you see a cultural or legislative change in the support infrastructure of

artists and artworkers coming in a climate of backlash against workers (or any social priority besides the well-being of financial institutions), and whether and what kinds of alliances would be necessary to make this possible?

W.A.G.E.: We define W.A.G.E.'s mission simply: cultural workers (visual artists, performers, independent curators, writers) must be a part of the art institution's economic equation. W.A.G.E.'s role in consciousness-raising is to reconnect with the systems that are currently in-place, in which cultural workers are positioned in relation to a labour model that's disconnected and dispersed, a self-exploitative "non-worker" model. As Andre Gorz stated, "We must learn to cast a different gaze upon work; to no longer think of it as something one has or doesn't have, but as what we do."

Our work doesn't negate other formulas, dialogues, paradigms, dreams and goals of alternate, and currently practiced, economies. But when the cultural worker is fiscally removed from the particular economic relationship W.A.G.E. is highlighting, one that falsely assumes and requires that institutional exposure equals a capitalist return on the free market; this speculative burden assumed by the art worker in a collapsed economy has less relevance than it did when there was a "robust" economy.

Very often when visual artists, writers, performers and independent curators present their work at art institutions (major and minor venues), both the labour involved and the presentation itself go uncompensated by the presenting institution. And yet our continued participation in the marketplace is

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essential to it's functioning; the tendency of some of our peers and colleagues to be dismissive of this reality perpetuates the notion of artists-as-hobbyists asking for special treatment.

Cultural workers are functioning within false dichotomies regarding the concept of work, speculative entrepreneurial schemes based on a business model of profit and/or laws of supply and demand, when their production and presentation models at the arts institution have no inherent relationship to those economic formulations. Both "cultural" and "capital" values currently function within the cultural worker's economic landscape; but while cultural capital does not necessitate/guarantee the capital gain of currency, capital-based currency is still required in exchange for survival.

One of the variables that leads to non-payment is that most of the labour involved in exhibiting/ performing/ lecturing etc. precedes the event itself and is done on a

voluntary basis, and it is this contribution which is very difficult to monetize. But there is clearly wage-labour involved in the presentation of art – art handlers are a case in point, they get paid an hourly wage to install and de-install exhibitions. An artist fee is both symbolic and real compensation for all of it.

In any other free-market-place, the contribution that artists make would be valued as labour and would therefore necessitate compensation. We're fighting to be compensated as educators and producers in the non-profit, and public-private partnership arts economy. Institutions taking part in this economy [Unknown A4] provide the public with a cultural experience which cannot exist without us – the cultural producers. Our cause recognizes that the rules played must be the ruled applied to everyone involved in this particular economic sector, to be paid within a system that, by law, must compensate the other labourers within it.

The traditional formula of "the worker" is fractured. We're acutely aware that cultural production and cultural capital are laden with "value". The question is, what kind of value? Cultural, economic, psychological, societal, entertainment, historical? A scheme in "futures" (as we know, a dead artist is worth more than a live one!) is not viable. Art institutions worldwide present tens-of-thousands of independent curators, writers and artists annually via exhibitions, performances, readings, panels, lectures, film/video screenings and other events. W.A.G.E. is in active dialogue about payment practices and financial distribution by the arts institutions within our communities.

MV: How do you see W.A.G.E. in the historical trajectory of groups like the Art Workers Coalition (as a campaign) or the

UK Artists Union (as an organization)? I suppose that historical experience was very much one of the problematics of organizing artists as workers – as opposed, perhaps, to artworkers who could seek representation from other and more established unions. It was about problems of collectivity, but also about valuing labour (when are you 'on the clock?'), and trying to separate that labour-value from how the artist's work might or might not function as a commodity in a market, and finally what kinds of weapons were available for artists to protect the value of their labour – withdrawal of labour not being an option, although of course there were 'Art Strikes' but that was a gesture with all kinds of other performative and political implications.

W.A.G.E.: We frame our goal as 'consciousness-raising' because we must begin to see ourselves as a community, to attach value to a holistic view of that community. We're highlighting the notion of the self-regulating art institution as a strategy: consciousness regarding our vast and varied economic realities as cultural workers must be recognized by the board members, administrators and staff of the art institution. The art institutions and the artist share a mutual dependency, and that relationship has never been contemporarily clarified in economic terms in contemporary terms. W.A.G.E. is building an advocacy organization based on something like CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/le Front des artistes canadiens), but of course recognizing the socio-economic landscape of communities in the U.S.

MV: One of the catchphrases of W.A.G.E. is the idea of being paid in 'capital value for cultural value'. And from what you say in your response, the

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nature of this value is to be established locally and in each particular institution or situation. I guess, like before, I'm interested in the role 'capital' plays in the narrative, since there's a difference between wages and capital, and part of the reason artists getting paid is politically and practically important is exactly for the artist or artworker to get paid not in 'futures' (capital, symbolic or otherwise) but in wages, so turning the artist from a speculator into a worker.

W.A.G.E.: The artist is currently both a speculator and a worker – again, a duality, not a dichotomy. We know there is a price for labour – identified as a "wage"; capital is the sum of commodity values. So hard currency is currently traded for "flesh and blood commodity" in wages, as well as for the objects of production. When the commodity's use-value is of general utility, its share of workforce remuneration is still necessitated at this juncture even through a late-capitalist transition. We need to start applying and understanding the multiplicity of terms available for our situation, like a corporatist Post-Fordist Walmartified cognitive capitalist commons of general intellect...

One could also argue that social practice and related post-studio strategies make it possible to quantify the actual

time spent making the work, which in a traditional studio practice is almost impossible to measure. Today, most contemporary artists (individual, collaborators and collectives alike) and independent curators produce a combination of ideas, situations and objects. Both the commercial and non-profit systems are presenting objects, performances/events and installations, linking them inextricably in the marketplace of art sales, as well as in the marketplace of networking/exposure. A traditional studio practice in which the artist/s produce objects on their own time, regardless of whether or not they get exhibited, is precisely the area of labour that is challenging to remunerate. Why should the artist/s get paid for time spent voluntarily making something which was not commissioned, and who should be expected to pay them? But the time spent working with/in an institution – what is presented at and for how long, and what the institutions budgets are – can be measured and monetized. We know that artists and institutions are mutually dependent.

MV: From your research into the Canadian artists union situation, as well as other existing models in Scandinavia, do you think a national legal framework – which you've advocated – ensuring a provision for artists' fees in institutional budgets – will be flexible enough to apply across different scales of institution, or is it intended for institutions above a certain size/budget? As far as I know, many of these compensation structures relate to the hire and exhibition of artists' work – how would these kinds of fee schedules apply to more 'discursive', transient or socially multiple types of practice? Doesn't the question of payment for artists' and artworkers' work (rather than the sales of the products of this



work) always end up back at defining the nature of this work?

W.A.G.E.: Any type of fee schedule must relate to contemporary practices, so an applicable and flexible schedule should be constructed by artists and institutions together. W.A.G.E. and Artists Space in NYC are launching a year-long collaborative project that will do precisely this. Our work with AS will provide framework for our W.A.G.E. –certification platform and other components of support mechanisms that W.A.G.E. can offer to cultural workers.

MV: Apart from the historical examples of artists organizing in their own interests after the model of worker's organizations which I raised in the previous question, is the campaign inspired by other historical or current examples which agitated on issues relating to equal pay but which were also civil rights struggles (like the ERA, but, more micropolitically perhaps, the welfare rights movement)? If so, are these more political or tactical inspirations? Do you see a relation to not just AWC and the like, but e.g. Wages for Housework?

W.A.G.E.: Yes, we see other labour and civil rights models – both historical and current – as relevant, applicable and inspirational, which is why we started W.A.G.E. We don't calculate whether they are "political" or "tactical" inspirations, or which one movement is more important to any of us – there's multiplicity and continual flux in how the work of activists and cultural transformations have influenced and are influencing our group.

AWC was highly motivating to our formation. We

went to the MoMA archives and looked through the AWC papers before starting W.A.G.E., and their list of demands was inspirational in the writing of the wo/manifesto. We looked to AWC to see what results they got through what types of actions. So at the onset we looked to AWC for what to do, as well as how we might approach things differently. We're very influenced by the development of CARFAC [Canadian Artists' Representation] and are interested in utilizing some aspects of their representational, flexible and continually evolving system of support for visual artists.

MV: What's your assessment of the prospects for legislative change in the current economic and political environment, which seems to be characterized by an austerity-era open season on workers' rights?

W.A.G.E.: Right now, we're developing a W.A.G.E.-certification platform in order to implement self-regulatory institutional practices. We're focused on creating economic formulations regarding the arts community's interdependencies. We will explore these possibilities this year, in order to implement a crucial and necessary economic parity within the arts institution.

MV: You've said the W.A.G.E. campaign is not meant to 'negate all other formulas, dialogues, dreams and goals of alternate, and currently practiced, economies – some that would inherently discount that very economic relationships we're highlighting.' Following from that, and again, not thinking of the wage and these other forms as mutually exclusive or antagonistic, how do you think the debates on intellec-

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tual property, peer production, copyleft, commons et al. relate to the kinds of questions you're trying to raise, all these being discourses that try to consider production outside the wage-labour relation, and the kinds of social relations it presupposes. So mainly it's a question about how you see the different economies within which artistic labour functions, and what other kinds of economies can it put into practice – something like e-flux's Time/Bank is perhaps a visible iteration of this in the art sphere.

W.A.G.E.: "Politics" (i.e. citizens tactics, militant connectionism) and "economics" (i.e. systems of currency distribution) continually create false dichotomies and notions of ideological purity to fracture and splinter how communities and systems work together with some sense of congruity. Again, the rules of the game being played must be the rules applied to all the players of that game. So the formulas must be determined by both the players and those played •

