

## W■A■G■E■

A text written for and presented at the Alliance of Artist Communities Annual Conference in October 2015, representing W■A■G■E■'s initial thoughts on guidelines for compensation within residency programs.

For those of you not familiar with W.A.G.E. Certification, it's a program initiated and operated by W.A.G.E. that publicly recognizes those nonprofit arts organizations demonstrating a history of, and commitment to, voluntarily paying artist fees. It is the first model of its kind, and the first in the U.S. to establish a sector-wide minimum standard for compensation, as well as a clear set of guidelines and standards for the conditions under which artistic labor is contracted.

W.A.G.E. Certification's current fee schedule and guidelines are for a *visual arts presenting context* under which artists are paid fees for the content and services they provide to the arts organizations that subcontract their labor. Payment is for the work artists do once they enter into a transactional relationship with an arts organization to present and participate in programs, and not for the work they may have done prior to that relationship in the process of making their art.

Unfortunately, this logic does not easily translate into the residency program context. Why not? Because artists are not necessarily providing content and services there—instead it is more likely that artists are engaging in the process-based activity that ostensibly leads to the content or services they will later provide in a visual arts presenting context. In other words, they're making the work they'll eventually exhibit, publish or perform.

In fact, it could reasonably be argued that residency programs invert the logic of a visual arts presenting context by providing a service *to* artists and not the other way around. In that sense it's tempting to summarize the nature of the exchange by saying that residencies serve artists by providing them with the time and space to engage in open-ended, process-based work.

Unfortunately neither of these is a given because there are many different kinds of residency programs, and as such there are exceptions and contingencies that complicate the nature of 'process' as well as the nature of the services that support it.

One of these complications is that some residencies insist on there being a public component, meaning that the 'process' must be made available to a viewing or consuming public, or that the artist must participate in some form of public engagement via the provision of a social service or public good, such as what initiatives like Creative Placemaking might demand of artists, and apparently do in their grantmaking to residency programs.

In fact, the question of whether artists should be expected to provide something in exchange for the services that residencies offer is central to understanding their function in the lives of artists, and to understanding the challenges residencies themselves face in raising money to support the provision of these services.

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For there is no question that residencies provide services: that seems to be a given. So instead of asking whether residencies provide services or not, let's ask: **who should be paying for these services?** There are two possible answers: Artists or Funders (and not a combination of the two: ideologically speaking we have to pick one or the other since they represent fundamentally different things, which I'll get to in a few minutes).

Before the question of who should be paying can be answered, we first need to look at the structural and economic conditions artists currently work within, so I'm going to outline four "facts". We know the following to be true:

1. Very few artists achieve commercial success and/or live off their work. In fact, most artists have secondary jobs to support themselves because we work within a system that requires many to fail in order for few to succeed.
2. Given the enormous cost of education and the necessity of an MFA to an artist's potential career success, (and now the PhD) artists who have advanced degrees are likely to be in debt. Since at this point the only way into the area of the art field where vast amounts of wealth are concentrated is via higher education, many artists are likely to be deeply in debt.
3. Many artists live in large urban centers in order to access denser social networks and exhibition opportunities where affordable studio space is basically nonexistent.
4. Artists work twice as much + have double the expenses at half the pay. This means that outside of our part-time jobs we have studio practices that we pay for and for which we don't get paid. Two jobs. One paid, and *not only* is the other not paid, but we actually pay to do this job (our art) through things like studio rent, production expenses etc.

These conditions mean that being an artist has become so prohibitively expensive that anyone who can't afford to work for free generally can't afford to enter the field. In other words, barriers to entry are higher than ever, the field is increasingly elite and homogenous in its composition and character, and is overall more inequitable and hostile to those who don't conform to its standards, which means that artists are increasingly forced to operate competitively as entrepreneurs in order to survive.

It should be noted that this is reflective of what's happening globally, to our cities, and to working people in every field. These conditions are not unique to art, which is why they urgently need to be addressed. So, given these conditions, what are the goals of W.A.G.E.?

- The first is to advocate for the equitable distribution of wealth and resources within the nonprofit arts sector and within society at large.

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- The second is to lower the barriers to entry within the art field and make it possible for those who can't afford to work for free to enter and participate should they choose to do so.

If we adhere to these goals, there's only one answer to the question of who should be paying for the services residency programs provide, and it's not artists. Given the four "facts" I outlined, not only can most artists not afford to pay for much of anything, they certainly can't afford to forfeit the little pay they might already have by leaving their jobs & expenses to attend residency programs. Furthermore, if artists have to pay, then only the most privileged will have access to them. If those who aren't privileged manage to find a way to attend, they will likely be pushed further into debt.

Both of these outcomes reinforce existing social and economic hierarchies and inequity, so from W.A.G.E.'s point of view, the answer to the first question is: **artists should not pay for the services that residency programs provide.** This can only mean one thing: Funders should pay for these services so that all artists can access them.

But given that most artists can't afford to leave their lives—which for all of us means the work of reproducing ourselves daily so that we can supply the labor from which others profit greatly, the next question has to be: **should artists be paid to attend residencies?** Because how else can we afford to leave our laboring lives?

To answer this question let's first talk about the important conditions residency programs offer in the context of a country that provides no material support to artists. At best they provide unstructured time to work; they provide high quality space within which to work; they provide care; they provide opportunities for artists to spend time in dialog with other artists; they encourage experimentation and process, and allow for failure and impose no expectation of measureable outcomes. These conditions are almost impossible to find elsewhere—in fact almost *everywhere* else, artists are under constant pressure to perform and achieve "measurable outcomes" in our increasingly professionalized capacity as entrepreneurs.

So given the reality of our everyday lives, the conditions and services residencies offer appear to be a gift to artists. And if we're receiving these conditions as a gift—as charity—then why should we be getting paid as well?

At this point I'm going to introduce the idea that there's a problem with the language I'm using. Maybe "getting paid" is not how we should think about this. Maybe we should think about it as reimbursement or as a subsidy. Maybe we should think about fees *from* residency programs *to* artists as the support we're not getting from government directly but which we need in order to produce our work.

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Think about “getting paid” as gaining access to the conditions we should already have access to in the first place. Think of a stipend or a fee as necessary, as a right, and as the only means of having access to adequate working conditions, since we live in a system that denies us these conditions in our daily lives. Think about “getting paid” as receiving the very services and protections a government that truly valued art and artists would be providing as a matter of course.

To be clear, the state *does* provide for the arts but it does so through the nonprofit sector instead of directly to artists themselves. Nonprofit organizations are tasked with redistributing money: as charities they receive taxpayer dollars directly from government and indirectly through the grant-making activities of private philanthropy.

Like most nonprofit organizations, residency programs are essential conduits through which artists receive government support. The problem is that we see it as charity, and not as a right, or to use a dirty word, as an *entitlement*. And this is precisely why we accept the proposition of going further into debt rather than taking—or rather, demanding—fees to subsidize the working lives we must temporarily leave behind in order to access the working conditions we should have had in the first place.

If as citizens we were supported directly through rent protection, free health care, and higher wages—or artist fees for that matter—not only would we not need fees from residency programs, we might not need residency programs at all. But things being what they are, we do need them, and we need them to be places that don't demand from us what every other aspect of our lives demands: we need them to give us time and space that is not productive. In other words, we need to get paid to be unproductive. Sadly, the un-productivity of “process” has to be subsidized by the state because it is so devalued in our culture, and increasingly by funders as well.

If the nonprofit sector is this country's way of redistributing money, then nonprofits must understand that it's incumbent on them to reinvest that money back into artists, which means providing them with fees in addition to the services they already provide, including space, time, care, and community.

The greatest challenge to realizing this lies with those who operate residency programs because it is they who must make the case to funders that artists should be paid for being unproductive. In fact, the idea of getting something for doing nothing is possibly the most radical proposition I can think of, which is why it is so completely necessary to propose it.