

W■A■G■E■

A speech given by W■A■G■E■ as part of artist Andrea Büttner's exhibition
Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
March 1, 2013

W.A.G.E. stands for Working Artists and the Greater Economy. We're a group of visual and performance artists and independent curators fighting for the regulated payment of artist fees by the nonprofit art institutions who contract our labor.

So this is sort of a strange situation because Andrea and the museum have generously invited W.A.G.E. to share in this meal inside of this important museum to talk about poverty and economic inequity in the art world.

W.A.G.E. is an activist group that addresses the role that not-for-profit art institutions play in preventing the artist's ability to survive within the greater economy by not paying us for our labor – so W.A.G.E. may just indirectly bite the hand that is feeding us tonight.

And in this context there might appear to be some contradiction in our claiming impoverishment in the face of so much affluence, especially when we participate in the creation of wealth, and we benefit from it too.

How can we complain? Artists have the privilege of getting to do what we want, when we want, and how we want. And sometimes we get to present our work in great cultural institutions like this, in a space like this, and like this exhibition which has been mounted with such care and sensitivity that it affirms that what we make together – as artist and institution – has little to do with the creation of wealth.

So it seems kind of inappropriate in such a place and at such a moment and in such company, to talk about the fact that it has everything to do with the creation of wealth, and that this wealth is unequally distributed. And that most of the time artists don't receive any form of compensation for their work, and that most of us - while being culturally affluent - live in relative material poverty.

So it's exactly because this is the wrong moment and the wrong place to address it, that W.A.G.E. has been invited to speak here. And if I chose not to speak about inequity with candor tonight out of deference to the museum and the opportunity it has afforded me in being here, I'd be enacting the very relation that W.A.G.E. is working to overturn.

Demanding payment for services rendered and content provided is not an act of disrespect and there should be no shame in it. To bite the hand that feeds us because it's not feeding us what we deserve and need in order to live, and because it feeds us at its own arbitrary discretion, is really just to break with a relationship that is inequitable.

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W.A.G.E. is focused on regulating the payment of artist fees because they are the most basic transaction in the economy of art. A fee is a rudimentary, crude and confused form of remuneration that bears no resemblance to the value of cultural labor today.

Artistic labor supports a multi-billion dollar industry and yet – there are no standards, conventions or regulations for artist compensation. We sometimes receive artist fees if we ask for them, or they're dispensed at the discretion of the institution. As compensation for the work that we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction, that sounds a lot like charity to us.

And charity is a transaction.

But W.A.G.E. believes that charity is an inappropriate transaction within a robust art economy from which most get paid for their labor and others profit greatly, and we believe that the exposure we get from an exhibition does not constitute payment. We provide a work force. We refute the positioning of the artist as a speculator and call for the remuneration of cultural value in capital value.

We expect this from non-profits precisely because they are not-for-profit. They are granted special status because they serve the public good. This also means they're not subject to the laws of supply and demand for their survival. Instead they receive subsidies – charity, in fact – to do their work. A not-for-profit is by definition a public charity.

A public charity also has a special moral status because it seems to operate outside of the commercial marketplace – it isn't subject to what profit demands from the rest of us. It doesn't have to compromise its ethics for the sake of capital. The white walls of the museum are also firewalls between integrity and capital, public good and profit margin, culture and compromise.

Paradoxically though, it is this very moral authority that imbues artworks and artists with economic value in the commercial marketplace. The logic is that if it's exhibited in a museum, it must have value beyond commerce – and it is exactly this perception which adds value to art when it reaches the commercial auction and sales markets.

Moral authority also enables the nonprofit to raise money. The more of it it has, the more money it can raise. The more money it can raise, the more responsibility it has to compensate its employees and subcontractors equitably – both because it can afford to AND because it should.

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The money that non-profits receive from the state, private foundations and corporate sponsors is given to them with the contractual obligation that they will use it to present public exhibitions and programs. That's what the money is given to them for.

The non-profit is a public charity but it is **not** a charity provider and artists are **not** a charity case because we earn our compensation – just like the director, the curator, and the graphic designer.

So, Artists: you also bear some responsibility in this equation. Don't tell yourself that you're lucky to be having an exhibition. You were subcontracted to produce content for an institution that receives charity for exactly that purpose. Exhibiting your work at an institution is a transaction. Even if €50,000 are being spent to produce your artwork, that €50,000 has been budgeted for, and an artist fee should also be budgeted for separate from production costs so that you can pay your bills, just like the salary of the person who wrote the budget, the salary of the person who did the fundraising – and even the person who donated the funds – they got a tax break. None of this is luck – it's a system.

Artists and arts administrators: we all need to change the way we think about this system because we are all responsible for it. That's what W.A.G.E. has been doing for the last 5 years.

And lately we've been thinking of the nonprofit model in a different way. We're thinking of it as an economic anomaly in the free market because it maintains an unusual position in relation to profit and the role profit plays in determining wages.

If it's true that wages are often kept low in order to maximize profit, then there is a real opportunity here – since profit is not the goal – to set wages in terms of their real value, and in direct relation to the cost of living. This might mean making some changes to programs and budgets. Let's imagine for a moment what that might look like.

What would it be like if artist fees were a distinct, separate, and visible line item in operating budgets?

What would happen if instead of having 10 exhibitions per year and paying artist fees of \$1,000 each to 20 artists, you presented 5 exhibitions and each artist got a \$4,000 fee? Reducing production doesn't reduce profit at an art institution – slowing things down would just achieve greater equity.

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What about an equation like this for paying artist fees: take the Director's salary of for example, \$100,000 and divide it by the number of exhibitions produced per year. \$100,000 divided by 5 exhibitions would mean that each artist would get a \$20,000 fee for their work. An artist could almost live on \$20,000 over the course of the year it took to prepare for the exhibition.

But we're going much further than that. We're using the artist fee as a starting point to think about *all* of the labor in an institution. For example, what would happen if the Director's salary were \$50,000 instead of \$100,000 and the security guard made \$30,000 instead of \$15,000? It's hard to imagine. And if the Director can't accept that kind of pay cut then more money should be raised because the biggest salary should not and cannot come at the expense of the compensation of those who are also fundamental to the organization's livelihood.

Institution, W.A.G.E. doesn't accept your claim of being a charity when you fundraise and a Capitalist when you design your budgets. W.A.G.E. challenges you to use your moral authority and special economic status to set new standards for the compensation of labor.

Institution, have we bitten your hand? Have we shamed you into understanding why we can no longer accept being written out of the economic equation?

If so, maybe this was in fact the right place and the right moment to have done so.

I'm pretty certain that not to have done so wouldn't have done justice to the very humble and radical proposition Andrea has made to us through her exhibition.

Thank you Andrea.