

CROSS CURRENTS

W.A.G.E. Hike

Working Artists in the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) helps artists advocate for fair payment, not just "exposure."

BY LUKE T. BAKER

"We can't pay you, but it will be great exposure." It's a refrain undoubtedly familiar to artists who've been asked to participate in an exhibition, give a talk, or write a catalogue essay for certain nonprofit organizations, or even some commercial galleries. Those who actually do receive compensation for their labor and time often find that fees can vary widely, making it difficult to determine what constitutes fair payment. Providing free (or nominally compensated) work has become normalized as a "labor of love" that seems necessary for the advancement of one's artistic career—even when American jewelers and precious stone and metal workers are barely eking out a living.

With businesses to run, families to feed, and MFA degrees to pay off, what can jewelers and metalsmiths do to unseat this expectation to work for free? The problem of exploitative labor practices is certainly not unique to this industry, but one artist-run organization offers a compelling art-world model for taking offenders to task. W.A.G.E. (Working Artists in the Greater Economy) was founded in New York in 2008 by a group of visual and performing artists and curators to address the economically unjust relationship between arts institutions and the artists whose labor they contract; in 2011, it became certified as a 501c3 non-profit organization. Its primary *cri de coeur* is the remuneration of artist fees—and not just "exposure"—in exchange for participation in exhibitions and creating other types of commissioned content. The "exposure economy," W.A.G.E. argues, forces artists to become speculators, producing work for free (often at their own significant expense), while gallerists, dealers, and museum professionals are guaranteed a living wage.

In its "womanifesto," W.A.G.E.'s feminist founders express a mission to "draw attention to economic inequalities that exist in the arts" resulting from "the organized irresponsibility of the art market and its supporting institutions"; specifically, "the refusal to pay fees for the

work we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction." The W.A.G.E. manifesto calls out a system that positions "the artist as a speculator," and serves as a call to arms, demanding "the remuneration of cultural value in capital value."

In 2014 W.A.G.E. developed a multi-tiered "artist's fee calculator," which establishes an industry-wide minimum "Floor W.A.G.E." for fourteen common types of unpaid creative labor. These rates scale based on a fixed percentage of an institution's total annual operating budget, and eliminate disparities in payment driven by gender, medium, and project budgets. In 2014, the group also launched its W.A.G.E. Certification program, to recognize U.S. arts organizations that have voluntarily agreed to pay artist fees at or above Floor W.A.G.E. minimums; at present, fifty-two organizations comply. Future planned initiatives include WAGENCY, a coalition that works with artists to negotiate payment according to W.A.G.E. standards, as well as an artist's transfer and sale agreement that ensures financial

According to survey data released in 2016 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, jewelers and precious stone and metal workers earned a median annual wage of \$38,200, with the lowest ten percent of respondents making less than \$22,060 per year.

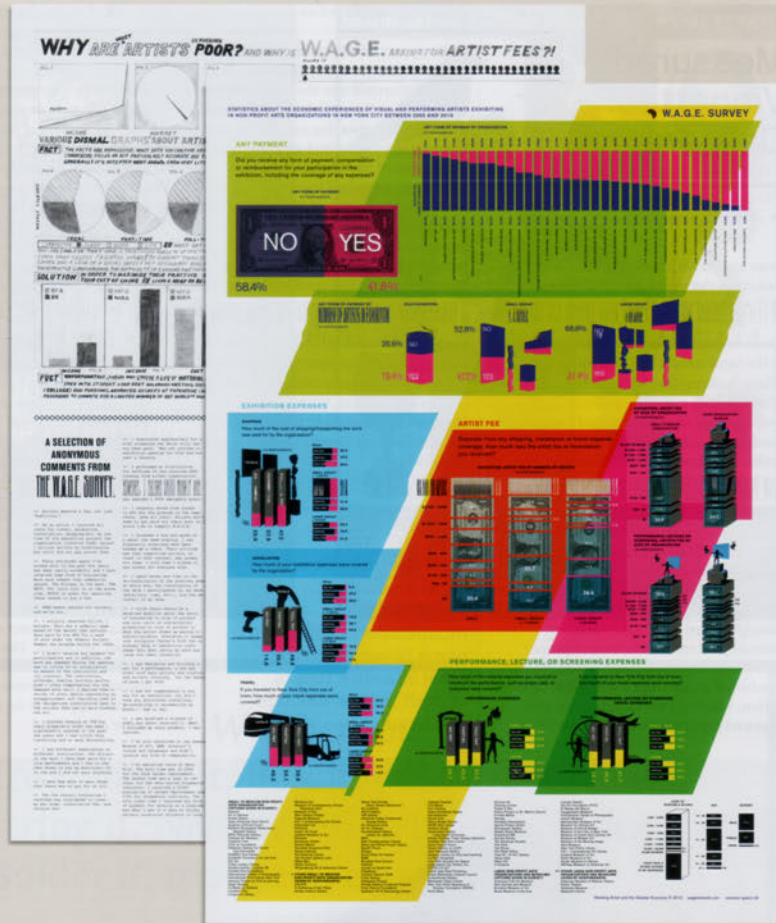
In a 2010 W.A.G.E. survey on payment practices, 58.4% of the nearly 600 responding artists who exhibited at NYC-area non-profit institutions from 2005-2010 indicated they received no form of compensation for their participation or expenses.

compensation for artists when their work changes hands on the secondary market.

While W.A.G.E. was established and continues to run primarily as an advocacy group for visual artists, several craft-centric organizations have found W.A.G.E. Certification a useful tool in ensuring the fair payment of their exhibiting artists and other constituents. The Weavers Guild of Minnesota, one of the country's oldest and largest groups dedicated to advancing and preserving the arts of weaving, spinning, and dyeing, became W.A.G.E.-certified in 2017. The working artists who teach its classes, give lectures, write articles, and run workshops are paid according to W.A.G.E.'s guidelines, and the guild negotiates W.A.G.E. fees for its members who exhibit work at external venues. "As an organization with a long history and leadership role in the weaving community, the Weavers Guild of Minnesota felt it was important to set the standard that paying artists is important in all sectors of the arts," Executive Director Beth Bowman asserts. "Many of our constituents are essentially small business owners making and selling their works just like visual artists, and deserve similar compensation for their time and talent." Chicago's Threewalls Gallery, founded in 2003 by contemporary crafts curator Shannon Stratton (now William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator at the Museum of Arts and Design), became W.A.G.E.-certified in 2015. "I don't see a reason to draw differences between an artist making paintings or an artist making videos or an artist making jewelry," Stratton notes. "If they are exhibiting in a non-for-profit, museum, etc., it's up to those venues to establish a fee schedule for exhibiting artists of any discipline, and it should be the same for all exhibitors."

Artist Lise Soskolne, an organizer within W.A.G.E. since its founding and its core organizer since 2012, finds that smaller exhibition spaces have more readily gotten on board with the group's mission, in part because they remain "more connected to their roots and to the reasons they actually formed in the first place, which is usually to support other artists." Even though Floor W.A.G.E. fees for institutions with annual operating budgets under \$500,000 are relatively affordable, committing to W.A.G.E. Certification can require budget restructures and appeals to funders. "The fee calculator and the certification guidelines actually provide an opportunity

Common Space Studio
W.A.G.E. Survey, 2012 (front and back)
poster
Courtesy of W.A.G.E.



for organizations to articulate what their fiscal needs are," Soskolne observes.

Craft guilds once protected the interests of skilled artisans by regulating markets and ensuring the ongoing economic viability of their members' vocations. The social and economic power of the guild system peaked during the Renaissance period, only to collapse with the tide of industrialization that swept across the Western world in the 19th century. Aligning with W.A.G.E. to

demand payment for commissioned content presents one model through which crafts workers could help build a coalition for economic reform and a more just redistribution of resources. This struggle also intersects with other critical issues facing the field of jewelry and metalsmithing, such as the use of ethically sourced materials. Soskolne makes W.A.G.E.'s position plain: "By not demanding to be paid, not only do you enable yourself to be exploited by the art

system, you also support the consolidation of wealth by it."

Luke T. Baker is a writer, design historian, and curator based in New York who has written for *The Museum of Modern Art*, *Metropolis*, *Prada*, *Modern*, *The Magazine Antiques*, *Art Papers*, and *The Studio Potter*.

Data from the W.A.G.E. Survey and other resources are available online at www.wageforwork.com.