How do artists make a living asks Larne Abse Gogarty

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2007, and the subsequent enforcement of austerity measures, artists have once again sought to organise collectively as workers. This has formed a response to both declining material conditions and the emergence of new possibilities for struggle. Following the launch of an ‘artists’ fee certification initiative by WAGE (Working Artists for the Greater Economy) in October 2014 (Artnotes AM381), it is worth outlining recent campaigns in order to analyse the varying politics of such mobilisations. How can we understand the current artists-as-workers paradigm in relation to the economics and power structures that sustain the art world? Furthermore, how different is this terrain of debate and activism to significant moments in the 1930s and 1970s, when artists also struggled for payment and wages?

WAGE has been active since 2008 and until 2010 the group focused on ‘consciousness raising’ about economic inequity in the art world. After that, its emphasis shifted to campaigning for ‘the regulated payment of artist fees by non-profit arts organisations and museums’, as its website describes. This led to an online survey for artists about the payment practices of non-profits in the New York City area. Following almost a thousand responses, the survey became evidence of consensus within the non-profit art world over non-payment of artists. More recently, WAGE has created WAGE Certification: a voluntary programme that publicly acknowledges non-profits that commit to remunerating artists and operating ‘ethically’.

Artists Space in New York became the first organisation to receive this WAGE seal of approval,
professionals as a corollary to the declared ‘ethical’ ground sustaining the system of certification.

Initiated in May 2014, Artists’ Union England describes itself as a ‘trade union for professional visual and applied artists’. To join the union, members must meet at least three of nine criteria in a list that includes: ‘[that] you have received professional grants or awards’; ‘Your artwork has been reviewed or featured in an art journal, magazine, newspaper or online curated platform’; and ‘You are represented by a gallery.’ The least exclusionary point reads: ‘You are regularly making and exhibiting artwork.’ These criteria, positioned as a necessary benchmark through which artists might begin to change their economic relations, are a drastic turnaround from the art strikes that animated the political and aesthetic activities of 1970s collectives such as the Art Workers Coalition, as well as the strategies of refusal by individual artists such as Lee Lozano and Gustav Metzger. Such strategies, based on withdrawing labour, can seem impossible or even inadequate at present because of a widespread state of precarity. In addition, the reduction of social security and the elimination of legal squatting means that the ‘alternative’ lifestyles produced by those forms of support have inevitably diminished or been rendered untenable. If professionalisation, and an emphasis on craft division, stands at the core of the Artists’ Union England membership, how does this relate to WAGE’s desire for ‘ethical’ relations between artists and institutions?

In contrast with the exclusivity of Artists’ Union England, WAGE succeeds somewhat in sidestepping an affirmation of professionalisation since the certification introduces a base-level fee for all artists, regardless of their individual status. As Soskolne explained, standardising payment based on labour runs counter to the blind faith in merit that dominates the art world. It therefore introduces a subtle critique of the art world’s fantasy that it is a neutral playing field, a falsehood sustaining the naive individualism of many artists’ belief that they might be the next exception. Related to this standardisation, Thompson asked WAGE whether the group was trying to create a union that had ‘no specialised skill set’, a question to which WAGE responded by stressing that it was not trying to create a union. Yet the possibility of articulating an artists’ union as one without a specialised skill set points towards what might be attempted, as against the present limitations of the Artists’ Union England’s affirmation of professionalisation and craft division, and beyond the partial myopia of the certification.

In a 2011 Artforum interview with Nato Thompson, WAGE argued that the certification could create ‘a culture of mutual respect’ between art institution and artist, asking: ‘What’s not to like about being ethical?’ This notion of mutual respect seemingly aims at a liberal-corporatist model of interaction, based on establishing more equitable relations between different partners (here the artist and the institution) that attempts to accommodate their different interests. In this regard, WAGE’s reformist approach to institutions somewhat aligns with the aims of the newly established Artists’ Union England (Artnotes AM376), and thus potentially highlights
boundaries of how art and labour could be understood, artists dodged the imposition of limits as to how a particular struggle could be viewed as succeeding. For example, Lozano’s General Strike Piece, 1969, involved cutting all ties to the art world, a process she explained by documenting exhibitions that she did not show in and the parties where she did not schmooze. Crucially, Lozano’s removal of herself from the art world was an active commitment rather than a failure to ‘succeed’ in the terms invoked by Artists’ Union England as a means to prohibit membership. Lozano’s strategy of refusal is also of interest in relation to Dave Beech’s examination of current boycotts (AM380) and Lizzie Homersham’s recent suggestion that artists adopt ‘lower visibility’, instead of compromising their politics in order to attain greater prominence (AM384).

It is also worth noting that the most militant labour struggles have generally been undertaken outside structures that enforce craft divisions and amenable relations with power holders. In recent years, a series of campaigns at a variety of workplaces including Guildhall, the University of London and Bloomberg have been organised by the Industrial Workers of the World and the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB). These are independent unions that are emphatically not in ‘partnership’ with bosses, or simply insurance companies providing a service to their members. Although these campaigns began around demands for a living wage, partly organised through London Citizens, they have swerved in more militant directions. In summer 2011, around 40 cleaners at Senate House organised a wildcat strike demanding months of back pay. As an article entitled ‘Crisis in the Cleaning Sector’ on Mute describes, following the first hour of the strike, management threatened reprisals if work was not resumed. However, by the fourth hour, a temporary office had been set up to deal with individual cases and, over the following two weeks, workers received over £6,000 in unpaid wages. As the old slogan goes, direct action gets the goods.

What might these displays of militancy based upon the withdrawal of labour offer as examples for the continuing necessity for artists to struggle for better conditions? As I have hinted, abolishing craft divisions rather than enforcing them and struggling against professionalisation might be a step in the right direction. It is also important to look at how ethics have been articulated as mediating between labour struggles and art practices. Notably, WAGE, along with other groups that seek to alter the conditions of production in the art world, is suspicious of blending activism with individual or collective art practices. One of the key ‘test cases’ leading to the creation of the certification was WAGE’s participation in the exhibition ‘Free’, held in 2010 at the New Museum in New York. The group was asked to contribute artwork and responded by offering instead to negotiate fees for the exhibiting artists, including Seth Price, Ryan Trecartin and Clunie Reid. The invitation extended to WAGE by the New Museum to participate as artists is what I am interested in emphasising. Although WAGE emphatically used ‘Free’ to proclaim its status as a campaigning group rather than an artists’ collective, the group’s involvement is nevertheless capable of being categorised as a performative intervention, regardless of any wariness about presenting activism as art.

The UK-based Precarious Workers Brigade (PWB) – a self-described group of precarious workers in culture and education – has faced similar issues in responding to the staging of activism as art by cultural institutions. Moving beyond a focus on the endemic nature of internships and free labour in the cultural sector, the PWB has also sought to establish solidarity with other ‘precarious’ social groups, such as migrants. Mobilising these conditions as the touchstone around which to organise is undeniably an admirable – if sometimes challenging – goal. The trickiness of this terrain is most apparent in how the group negotiates the contradiction between invitations to present its members’ work within the art world and its desire to organise beyond artists, writers and academics.

The PWB created an ethical code that aims to ‘balance organising work on the ground (eg campaigns, demonstrations etc), administration and the “representational” (eg writing texts, giving talks, workshops etc). The “representational” work must also adhere to further ethical standards, and the PWB will only work with organisations willing to clearly state, either verbally or in print, the working conditions behind a particular project. That both WAGE and the PWB have faced situations where their activism is presented as consumable culture points to the ability of capitalist institutions to accommodate and defang purportedly radical politics.

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make a career out of being radical, others who unionise in this country may still be penalised, as recent revelations regarding the blacklisting of more than 3,200 construction workers demonstrates. Both WAGE and the PWB are keenly aware of the contradiction between the institutional absorption and containment of leftist politics at a representational level, while corruption, bad ethics and exploitative conditions of production remain unchecked. This is why both groups have sought to keep individual and/or collective art careers separate from their campaigns.

Despite political and strategic differences between WAGE, the PWB and Artists’ Union England, they all invoke ethics as the ground upon which to distinguish between favourable and unfavourable institutions. Interestingly, this orientation perhaps comes less from the history of labour struggles and more from the principles guiding the non-profit sector which, paradoxically, all these groups criticise for non-payment of artists. The academic and activist Dylan Rodríguez has written a significant critique of what he terms the ‘non-profit industrial complex’, arguing that the proliferation of non-profit organisations since the 1970s has served increasingly to assimilate dissent into a ‘state protected social movement industry’, a trajectory particularly apparent in the US. While operating as a non-profit organisation may assist in introducing relative stability to infrastructure and funding, it also means that the decentralised, informal and genuinely oppositional qualities of social movements can be lost. More importantly, the funnelling of activism into non-profits with discrete campaigns introduces an epistemological frontier to the possibility of imagining and working towards social transformation. This links to the reformist limit of WAGE that Soskolne acknowledges, a remit underpinned by WAGE’s invoking of ethics as a set of criteria that always risks being identified with the principles of the very organisations its campaigns target. Crucially, ethics are generally based upon abstraction in order to guarantee liberal notions of justice. Despite the best intentions of the PWB and WAGE in affirming this category, such criteria may repeat the occlusion of material experience and difference. In this regard, continuing to organise along explicitly political principles, which one may surmise guides the PWB and WAGE in any case, may present a more radical – if necessarily partisan – strategy than emphasising ethics.

Yet with this we arrive at the problem of solidarity (or lack thereof) that has dogged artists’ labour struggles since the days of the communist John Reed Clubs (JRC) and Artists’ Union in New York during the 1930s, as well as the Art Workers’ Coalition in the 1970s. The JRC was a US federation of local groups composed of leftist writers, artists and intellectuals which organised exhibitions and sought, as its manifesto declared, to ‘fight white chauvinism’ and ‘struggle against art and literature rooted in bourgeois ideology’. However, by 1935 the tenets of the JRC looked too sectarian in the midst of Popular Front strategies which demanded that communists join forces with social democratic organisations. The partisanship of the JRC was out of step with the politics of the New Deal and, as such, it was dissolved and replaced with bodies that mediated between artists and institutions, including the League of American Writers, American Artists Congress and the Artists’ Union. This last group worked primarily to advocate for artists employed by the state, through the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration. In contrast with these organisations, and WAGE’s certification as also being based on mediation, the JRC drew quite clear political lines between artists.

Writing about the Art Workers’ Coalition, Lucy Lippard pointed to the difficulties of such commitment, describing how: ‘the majority of the art world is … afraid of losing the toehold it got last year on the next rung of the ladder.’ As Homersham has expressed, sentiments arguing that ‘artists must eat’ generally guide the absence of commitment among younger ‘post-internet’ artists, some of whom have readily accepted political compromise and are comfortable with integration into the art market. In the face of this, Homersham argues that we need ‘to make a case for a strategy of refusal in which food does not predominate’. Furthermore, for artists’ labour struggles to be effective, not only in terms of material benefits but also more speculatively for the field of practice and aesthetics, I argue that lines do need to be drawn. Soskolne tentatively described a new proposal that WAGE could certify individual artists committed to exhibiting only with certified organisations, while at the same time describing this as ‘outlandish’ and divisive. Divisiveness and outlandishness are, in fact, characteristics that need to be affirmed today. At best, such strategies could potentially mark a commitment not only to one’s own politics, but also to each other; such a gesture of solidarity remains fairly radical in relation to the largely individualised and accommodating behaviour that dominates the art world. By means of such a commitment, we might also hope to reconnect practice with politics along lines that would not simply slake a cynical thirst for ‘critical’ art, but rather provide new modes of consciousness that are capable of breaking with the current epistemological and material limits to social transformation.

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