

W■A■G■E■

Written for and presented at *We (Not I)* at Artists Space, NY in October 2015 as part of a roundtable with Silvia Federici, Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz, Lise Soskolne and Melanie Gilligan, facilitated by Marina Vishmidt.

By now most of you are probably familiar with W.A.G.E. but for those of you who aren't, W.A.G.E. stands for Working Artists and the Greater Economy. W.A.G.E. currently defines itself as an activist organization focused on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions and establishing a sustainable labor relation between artists and the institutions that contract them.

W.A.G.E. was born here in New York City in 2008 in direct response to the gross excesses of the commercial art market, which in 2007 alone had expanded by 55%. By then it was clear that the torrents of profit that had flooded every dimension of our social relations were never going to trickle down far enough to provide any tangible economic benefit to the very people upon whose labor they were based.

Many of these people were women.

And while there wasn't (and still isn't) much of a sales market for artworks produced by women, the cultural capital of some of these women seemed to be quite efficiently producing economic value within and for the city's nonprofit cultural institutions—themselves closely linked to the commercial market. And some of these women found that, despite their visibility, they were always broke and struggling and had no conceivable value in this new art world beyond that which they could potentially generate through the charm of performing their economic impoverishment as artists.

Some of these women recognized a larger structural problem that was writing artists out of the economic equation, understanding that this structural problem is buttressed by the belief that artists are compensated in ways that transcend commerce, like the intangible rewards of the so-called creative process: love, satisfaction, passion, and self-expression, and that this misguided belief is compounded by the promise of exposure in lieu of financial compensation.

W.A.G.E. was brought into this world by some of these women, and as such W.A.G.E. was brought into this world by feminists. W.A.G.E. was initiated with the writing of a Womanifesto, and while the Womanifesto makes no mention of women artists in particular, W.A.G.E. was and is inherently a feminist project.

Our Womanifesto concludes with this now familiar refrain: “We Demand Payment for Making the World More Interesting”. This demand has come to imply that artists should expect compensation for the work of making art, and that we should be paid for our labor as artists; paid for the labor of making the world more interesting by virtue of being artists.

“We Demand Payment for Making the World More Interesting” can also be understood as a glib acknowledgement that we understand our designated role in providing a very

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particular brand of “interesting”—a non-threatening kind of interesting, one that can be monetized and seamlessly generate profit for others. It can certainly be understood this way, but to be clear: this refrain should not be understood simply as a demand for wages.

Exactly 40 years ago in 1975 Silvia Federici (with whom I am grateful to share this stage) wrote ‘Wages Against Housework’, a call to arms for the revolutionary international campaign known as Wages for Housework which she co-founded in 1972. Wages for Housework identified housework and childcare as the foundation of all industrial labor, since the work of women in the home provided the conditions that enabled the reproduction of labor power—without it, factories would be empty. Demanding that women be compensated and paid as waged labor pointed to the subjection of women but also to the source of their subjection—capitalist relations, the source of all subjection for those who don’t own the means of production. Silvia’s text opens with this passage:

“Many times the difficulties and ambiguities which women express in discussing wages for housework stem from the reduction of wages for housework to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective. The difference between these two standpoints is enormous. To view wages for housework as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which women have been confined in capitalist society.”

A very similar point can be made with regard to the work of W.A.G.E. Let’s see what happens if I take this passage and replace each mention of **women** with **artists**, and **housework** with **artwork**:

“Many times the difficulties and ambiguities which artists express in discussing wages for artwork stem from the reduction of wages for artwork to a thing, a lump of money, instead of viewing it as a political perspective. The difference between these two standpoints is enormous. To view wages for artwork as a thing rather than a perspective is to detach the end result of our struggle from the struggle itself and to miss its significance in demystifying and subverting the role to which artists have been confined in capitalist society.”

This raises an important question: What is the role to which artists have been confined in capitalist society?

Like everyone else, the role to which artists have been confined in capitalist society is one that serves capital. And as such, the role of artists in capitalist society is not exceptional. Our labor is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by a

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multibillion-dollar industry. It is also not exceptional in how its status as a labor of love is precisely what has led to its devaluation.

And while it is true that we have been confined to a role that serves capital, we have also been confined to a role in which we are expected to work against it. Art institutions *expect* us to question, and attempt to alter the aesthetic, political, material, social, and economic conditions from and within which we operate. Thus our exceptionality lies in our ability to work both inside and outside of capitalism at the same time, to draw from and work against. The problem is that we have been led to believe that we shouldn't get paid to be in this position, that we don't have the right to be the exception to the rule.

From my point of view, it is only once we lay claim to our exceptional status that we can begin to fully engage our political potential as artists. It is precisely our exceptionality that we must both acknowledge and put to work. This means claiming the privilege of having it both ways: it means believing that we can be both critical of the system within which we work *and* get paid for it—that privilege should be our demand and it should not be an exceptional one.

Our exceptionality is, or should be, that we get to have it both ways because everyone should get to have it both ways. The right to exceptionality is the demand.

But this 'having it both ways' only describes our status, which, until something is done with it, until it is put to work, it remains more of a state of being: a state of exception, a state of stasis. More work is required to turn it into a politics.

Putting our exceptionality to work means engaging our labor on political terms, and as a political act—not as an artistic gesture. This means demanding compensation for the work that we do when we engage with the forces of capital, because it is precisely this demand that activates our political agency within it.

But remember that having it both ways isn't free or unconditional, it isn't a gift—we have to work for it and risk something by doing so, which means constant struggle and being prepared to take a position.

Taking a position means being prepared to withhold your labor when necessary, because it's only once we have organized effectively around non-payment within our own field that we can align ourselves with other workers' struggles. Before we can align ourselves with other workers' struggles we must be prepared to occupy our own exceptionality, however uncomfortable, and as politically as possible.