

W■A■G■E■

A position statement by W■A■G■E■ written in response to the question
When and how should artists be paid for their art? Hand-in-Glove, 2015.

There are many reasons artists don't get paid for their art. Most common among them is the belief that artists are compensated in ways that transcend commerce, such as the intangible rewards of the so-called creative process: love, satisfaction, passion, self-expression, and so on.

For this reason and for many other reasons, art is perceived as an exceptional activity—and in many ways it is an exceptional activity. But to the extent that this exceptionality is used as a justification for non-payment and prevents artists from earning a living, it has to be considered and engaged strategically.

So I'm going to use Alison's question to address the issue of exceptionality and at the same time pose it as a political conundrum and as a matter of strategy in terms of labor organizing.

When and how should artists be paid for their art? In the context of the nonprofit sector, artists should be paid fees for the content and services they provide to the arts organizations that subcontract their labor. Payment in this context is for the work artists do when they enter into a transactional relationship with an arts organization, and not for the work they may have done prior to that relationship in the process of making their art.

In other words, remuneration is not for artists' labor in making what I will call 'art products' (material or immaterial)—it is for artists' participation in producing programs (publicly or privately) in conjunction with arts organizations.

In this sense, and via the specificity of this definition, an artist is not being paid for the work of being an artist, and as such I am not defining art as work, and I am not identifying artists as workers.

This is not to say that artists don't work. Our experience tells us that we do. The precarity, desperation, and exhaustion that result from operating entrepreneurially within a hyper-competitive field that rewards the few at the expense of the many certainly feels like work. And these conditions very closely resemble those in almost every other field, since nobody is really spared under the totalizing logic of neoliberal capitalism. So doesn't this make us workers?

It could. But if we identify as workers, then as artists we surrender ourselves, and our work, fully to the logic of this system—especially if we are to be compensated as waged labor. Not only is it a fool's errand to attempt to quantify and monetize art-making in terms of wages, but by doing so we will have given up something important. We will have given up the most critical aspect of our exceptional status: that through which we might exercise our political agency.

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Contrary to popular belief, the exceptional status of the artist is not defined by our so-called ‘creativity’, the mysterious process perceived to operate loftily above, adjacent to, or outside of commerce. Rather, it’s that we operate both inside and outside of commerce at the same time, and it is precisely this exceptional status that we must preserve and put to work.

Now, what does it mean to exercise political agency as artists? Broadly speaking it means explicitly questioning and altering the aesthetic, political, material, social, and economic conditions from and within which we operate. It means holding (occupying) a space within which art can engage a politics, where art might resist the economic and political forces that exploit it – the forces that make it work for capital instead of against it. And this space needs to be held from both within and without art’s economy.

It is the exceptional status of the artist that makes this possible because our exceptional status is, or should be, that we get to have it both ways. This means that we get to be critical of the system within which we work **and** get paid to do so—that should be our demand and it should not be an exceptional one.

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 is required to turn it into a politics.

Now this brings me back to the question of identifying as workers, and identifying art as work. Aligning ourselves with the exploited waged workers many of us have historically sought to address, identify with, or emancipate through our practices might *appear* to be a viable political position but in actual fact, identifying as workers reduces our political agency by subjecting us to the conditions that inherently disable our potential to operate politically. Why? Because as workers, we would surrender to capital, and the space to exercise political agency would be eliminated.

The exceptional status of the artist as someone working both inside and outside of capitalism, drawing from and working against, is something we must both acknowledge and put to work. In other words: as artists we must acknowledge that our labor is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by a multibillion-dollar industry, while simultaneously putting our exceptionality to work by engaging our own labor on political terms, and as a political act—not as an artistic gesture.

Demand compensation for the work you do when you engage with the forces of capital, but do it in order to maintain your political agency within it. 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 from my point of view means constant struggle and being prepared to take a

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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.