



# Working Artists and the Greater Economy

Lise Soskolne  
interviewed by  
Cathrin Mayer

Auction prices, visitor numbers, prize money — the art field seems to entertain a fascination with economy and finance. But when the subject turns to artist fees the fizz goes flat. I once talked to a friend who had just had her first solo show in a major art institution. On the way to the opening she decided to take the subway, only to realize she could not afford the ticket. Her account balance was already in the red; something had gone wrong with the accounting and her artist's fee had been delayed. Simultaneously, in that very subway station, she saw a huge poster advertising her exhibition, with her name in capital letters. She imagined that if a ticket controller came and asked for her I.D., she would just point to the wall and say: Look, this is me.

The discrepancy between the economy of visibility and the actual monetary economy is probably at its largest in the art world. It is not an exaggeration to say that this situation sometimes keeps me awake at night. I am not an artist but I work with them on a daily basis, as a curator in a nonprofit institution. But I live in Berlin, a city that is shaped by extremely precarious labour conditions for the majority of people working in the arts. Ultimately it comes down to one question: Can I afford to work?

This is not new. The massive structural problems in the field of art are often dealt with as part of curatorial and artistic practices and have been subject to countless exhibitions, conversations and panels. But my impression is that to a high degree these discussions address only the symptoms of the condition, such as permanent exhaustion. Finding solutions or models that actually work against those conditions is more difficult.

Cathrin:

I remember reading somewhere that the artists A.K. Burns, A.L. Steiner, K8 Hardy and you were all involved in the founding of W.A.G.E. All of us working in the cultural sector discuss our discontent among our colleagues about working conditions, but collegial support is one thing and actually deciding to create an activist platform is another. How did the process evolve?

Lise:

Actually, W.A.G.E. wasn't founded by four people, but by a group of ten or more. They were both women and men, queer and not queer; some were visual artists, others were performing artists, and others were independent curators. All were living in New York and were fed

The following interview with Lise Soskolne, core organizer of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), is an attempt to highlight distinct approaches to changing this unhealthy state and the infeasible economic relationships between artists and institutions. Based in New York, where it was founded ten years ago, W.A.G.E. works with more than 60 institutions across the United States. The arts infrastructure in the US is built upon independent funding sources, mostly coming from the private sector. Individual and corporate donors and nonprofit foundations make up the lion's share of these institutions' income. This clearly differs from the European model in which the state is still the main carrier and where funding comes with strict conditions and rules to fulfil.<sup>1</sup>

But in Europe as well, independent funding sources and consequent privatization are becoming more and more common. This is partly due to regressive politics, currently witnessed all over Europe, that lead to massive cuts in governmental funding structures. Consequently, there is a new need for independent regulatory organizations. This conversation gives an insight into self-organization as one proposed path in this struggle, but also discusses interlinked topics, such as the representation and feminization of work, the role of the artist as entrepreneur and the launch of WAGENCY, a new programme by W.A.G.E. that introduces an expanded method for collective mobilization.

1 — 'Berlin artists face poverty, meagre pensions and a yawning gender pay gap, survey reveals' by Catherine Hickley, *The Art Newspaper*. Published August 16, 2018. [www.theartnewspaper.com/news/berlin-artists-face-poverty-meagre-pensions-and-a-yawning-gender-pay-gap-survey-reveals](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/berlin-artists-face-poverty-meagre-pensions-and-a-yawning-gender-pay-gap-survey-reveals)

up with its exploitive art system. Not everyone came to every meeting or replied to every email but my recollection is of a combustible chemistry that kept the group together, which in retrospect seems critical to this kind of work. In that sense, I don't entirely recall a decision to create an activist platform, because with W.A.G.E., and in my experience with other projects, you can't orchestrate dissent. W.A.G.E. came into being and remains alive because it responded to conditions as we found them, asked questions about those conditions, gathered information about them, and proposed solutions. It also helped that it was fun.

At the second public meeting we formed ad hoc working groups, and with that

the reality of this as work began: administration, data, tedium. Involvement was strong but inconsistent, and like anywhere else, the labour of some was obscured by the visibility of others. For that reason, I tend to focus on what W.A.G.E. did, rather than on who did what, particularly if one chooses to read W.A.G.E. through a feminist lens. Consider that the individual authorship of collective work could be regarded as profoundly antifeminist. In fact, in 2010 the four people you mention made, for the first time, a collective decision to author an Artforum interview with our individual names, and that decision may well have written out of W.A.G.E.'s history others who made important contributions early on. Was it necessary? Is it necessary to name me personally as the interview subject? I'm not sure I have the answer but I believe it's important to raise the question.

Cathrin:

A ten-point 'Womanifesto', which can be read on the group's website, declares the agency and demands of W.A.G.E. Those points do not directly address the question of women's labour in the arts, but your self-understanding as a feminist platform seems evident, due to your use of linguistic play in the document's title. It seems to me that the 'feminization of work' in the curatorial field is very common. The word curate stems from the Latin word 'curare', to take care of something or someone. What particular difficulties does one face as a woman artist?

Lise:

The difficulties faced by white women artists, black women artists and women artists of colour are likely not dissimilar to those faced by women in other fields, since patriarchy and white supremacy are just as fully operational in the art system. Not being empowered to ask for payment is probably something women experience far more than men, but the point is that nobody should have to ask to be paid. I don't necessarily see W.A.G.E. as a feminist platform per se but welcome that perception if it's useful to others.

I do see connections between domestic workers' campaigns and W.A.G.E., and between W.A.G.E.'s demands and those of the Wages for Housework movement of the early 1970s. Wages for Housework identified housework and childcare as the foundation of all industrial labour, since the work of women in the home provided the conditions that enabled the reproduction of labour power—without it, factories would be empty. Demanding that women be compensated and paid as waged labour pointed to the

subjection of women but also to the source of their subjection in capitalist relations, the source of all subjection for those who don't own the means of production. In 2015 I was privileged to be on a panel with Silvia Federici, a cofounder of Wages for Housework, for which I conducted a thought experiment using a passage from her 1975 text *Wages Against Housework*. She wrote:

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.

I believed a similar point could be made with regard to W.A.G.E.'s demand, so I took that passage and replaced each mention of women with artists, and housework with artwork. Here is the result:

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This raises an important question: What is the role to which artists have been confined in capitalist society? Like everyone else, our role is to serve capital. And as such, the role of artists in capitalist society is not exceptional. Our labour is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by a multibillion-dollar industry. It is also not exceptional in how its perception as

a labour of love is precisely what has led to its devaluation in money terms.

If W.A.G.E.'s campaign wasn't essentially a reformist one due to its very modest demands, if we made demands for real wages like Wages for Housework did, the art system would collapse. Making what might be seen an outrageous demand is the only way to make plain what we really should be outraged at: our collective subjection. This was part of the genius of Wages for Housework.

Cathrin:

For me as a silent observer the phrase 'self-help' came to my mind while thinking about W.A.G.E., a topic I am generally very interested in when it comes to questions of labour. For me it seems to be an adequate description of the intentions and purposes of the organization. As I see it those are, on an activist level, fighting against disingenuous payment politics for artists, and on an institutional level, providing museums and art centres with tools to enable them to implement fair payments. Would you agree? And is this also a motivation for you, to help institutions to help themselves?

Lise:

I talk about 'self-regulation', which I think of as being very different from self-help. At the risk of invoking a word that in the US has been suffering from widespread misuse and overuse — 'neoliberal' — my understanding of self-help is as a marketplace produced by neoliberalism, whereas self-regulation is a strategy that challenges neoliberalism's impact on our ability to organize together against its effects. Self-help assumes that we hold ourselves personally responsible for the failed material conditions of our lives, as well as for fixing them, and it offers palliative solutions which have nothing to do with the structural conditions that determine said failure. No daily mantra or mindfulness practice can fix neoliberal capitalism's inability to make us whole after it has violently torn us apart.

Decades of privatization, deregulation, disinvestment and austerity have given rise to social conditions that guarantee hyper-individuation and prohibit us as citizens and as workers from collectivizing our misery and the rectification of it. Self-help keeps us preoccupied with self-blame for our suffering and we forget that its source is also external. Self-regulation, on the other hand, in its name and by the potential of its mechanics, draws attention to at least one source of the problem: an absence of involvement by the federal government in correcting inequity through regulation. Self-regulation is no

strategic match for the impact actual legislation would have on racialized economic injustice, but it is at least one approach that might be taken up by the citizens who have effectively been abandoned and now victimized by their governing body.

In the context of the art system and W.A.G.E.'s very specific focus on the nonprofit sector, a lack of state involvement has produced two related conditions: Artists' labour is not classified as a form of work and as a result its remuneration is unregulated. Without regulation, there are no external mechanisms in place to stop the exploitation of what is essentially unpaid labour. Our campaign isn't an appeal to the state to correct either of these conditions. It's an appeal to institutions to join artists in self-organizing our own field.

Instead of advocating that artists improve their financial literacy, learn to make budgets, sell their work, or write better artist statements — the art field's version of self-help — W.A.G.E. builds tools for self-regulation grounded in collective mobilization. A forthcoming initiative called WAGENCY will enlist artists in sharing responsibility with institutions for shifting the field, requiring them to self-regulate by insisting on being paid W.A.G.E. fees. If there is any self-empowerment involved here, it's the activation of individual economic and political agency by both artists and institutions.

Cathrin:

Equal payment for women in and out of the art world contributes to a larger and very complex question of representation that transcends the question of gender and also includes the visibility of marginalized groups. In Europe we are still seeing very white programming in institutions. Here one possible solution could be that the funding bodies, which to a very high degree manage state money, could provide recommendations for diverse programming. To what degree do you think W.A.G.E. could raise such questions in the American context?

Lise:

On the question of 'diversity' in programming, W.A.G.E. Certification as initially proposed would have regulated the programmes and staff constitution of institutions by race and gender, and enforced equitable pay scales for all employees. The way I saw it, this was a chance to finally get beyond W.A.G.E.'s myopic focus on artist fees, or at least use it to address other connected forms of inequity. But in 2013, at a summit that determined the parameters of W.A.G.E. Certification, it was collectively decided that



W.A.G.E. Certification Summit, Cage, New York, 2013. From left to right: Howie Chen, Richard Birkett, Marina Vishmidt, Andrea Fraser, Alison Gerber and Stephanie Luce. Photo by Lise Soskolne

making too many demands on institutions would mean the failure of the project. Regulating race and gender were in that context off the table and W.A.G.E. Certification was launched as a programme that recognizes equity on hyper-specific economic terms that are, in theory, inclusive of all artists.

I say 'in theory' because it will of course take more than paying artist fees to decentre whiteness and redistribute the field's composition across class. W.A.G.E.'s strategic decision to stay focused on fees hasn't stopped us from addressing why 'in theory' isn't good enough, and this has happened in writing, through discourse, and by working intersectionally whenever possible.

It would be irresponsible for W.A.G.E. not to concern itself with inequity across the supply chain, including unpaid interns and fellows, low-wage service workers performing frontline and invisible labour, gendered administrative staff who are undervalued and overburdened, as well as contracted freelance art handlers and teaching artists without benefits, health insurance or workplace protections. In some cases, the field's economic inequity includes everyone except the grossly overpaid director and sometimes also the self-exploiting underpaid director — but in all cases the division of labour is racialized.

W.A.G.E.'s advocacy exclusively on behalf of artists has been necessary to articulating artists' exceptional status within the field as unpaid workers, but it has also produced a paradox: By excluding other supply chain workers from our campaign, we have effectively reasserted our own exceptionality as artists and called into question any commonality our labour might have with others. This is something I try to work against at every opportunity and hope to address eventually through policy.

Getting funding bodies in the US on

board with W.A.G.E.'s work has always been part of our agenda and is itself a parallel campaign for self-regulation among grant makers. We should do this too, but it seems to me that given the arch moral claims public institutions make about their purpose and who they serve, they should be the prime target of pressure in terms of equal representation and pay. Here in the US, the monopoly of white programming, as you put it, appears to be breaking up as institutions scramble to demonstrate their 'wokeness', but it remains to be seen for how long. If you speak to those who've been around the art world for a while and are invested in these issues, they'll likely shrug and point out that this happens every 30 years.

Cathrin:

One blind spot seems to be the artist as employer. Vika Kirchenbauer wrote the brilliant text 'Aesthetics of Exploitation' last year addressing this issue. In times when artists can have up to 100 other artists working for them, they become entrepreneurs and operate in institutional structures. How do you think this 'blind spot' of the artist as employer should be dealt with? And do you see other blind spots in the field of art when it comes to payment issues?

Lise:

I've been vexed by the word 'entrepreneur' lately so please allow me to briefly rant. Artists don't become entrepreneurs when they employ other artists — they become employers and subcontractors. When electricians start off as independent contractors and take on more work, they subcontract it out to other electricians and become employers, but we don't characterize them as entrepreneurs. We simply say they operate a business. Artists should not be confused with or compared to entrepreneurs. We're not startups and we generally don't enter into this line of work as innovators or speculators, or to

make piles of money. If we did and if we could there would be no need for W.A.G.E.

Entrepreneurship is invoked on the one hand by self-styled ‘professional practice’ advocates in praise of those artists who succeed in making a living from their work, and derisively on the other by hardline ‘career moralists’ who accuse them of having sold out when they do. To my mind, neither of these characterizations is accurate and both are divisive. They don’t represent artists’ actual relationship to earning income, and are useful only to the extent that they demonstrate an absurd level of denial about the structural impediments to artists’ survival within the field over the long term, let alone the possibility of entering it at all unless one is independently wealthy. Entrepreneurship is a misclassification and a distraction that assumes all artists have equal agency and control over their ability to earn a living, thereby denying race, class and gender as critical factors. The playing field is not level and no working artist has control over their ability to earn a living—how could we when what we do isn’t even considered work? How can we when opportunity and resources are so unevenly distributed on the basis of race, class and gender?

To get back to your actual question about artists who employ other artists, W.A.G.E. is about to launch WAGENCY, an effort to organize artists’ labour, and it includes guidelines for, and the (self-)regulation of, assistant labour. When artists hire others to help produce their work, they function in a similar capacity to institutions. They should, therefore, be responsible for fulfilling a parallel set of expectations from the point of view of those they hire. WAGENCY limits this to the labour performed by artist assistants because, as with the labour of artists, there are no existing guidelines or standards for compensation in this area. It is also a crucial link in the supply chain and an important source of income for younger artists.

Cathrin:

What exactly happens after an institution has decided to register with W.A.G.E.?

Lise:

Once an institution is registered and certified, they begin the day-to-day maintenance of their commitment to self-regulation. First, they’re supposed to place a dynamic, time-stamped SVG W.A.G.E. certificate on their website, indicating to both artists and grant makers that they’re certified and that their certification is current. They are then responsible for tracking and

logging all fee payments made to artists throughout the fiscal year. These records are hosted and housed on W.A.G.E.’s website, and at the close of the fiscal year institutions submit them to W.A.G.E., along with a closed-out budget that includes ‘Artist Fees’ as its own distinct line item.

This formal auditing process is not without administrative rewards: We designed the interface to affirm and incentivize fee payment above the minimum and to provide institutions with data that can be used in their applications for funding. After records are submitted at the close of the fiscal year, the process begins again: Because certifications are consecutive and must be maintained year by year, institutions must register to be recertified by uploading a projected budget and inputting their total operating expenses. The system instantly generates a new fee schedule in accordance with these expenses and determines the fees an institution is required to pay.

Cathrin:

W.A.G.E. not only has an online platform but is also engaged in research, writing and teaching. Soon WAGENCY, which you already briefly talked about above, will also be launched. Could you introduce us to the expanded methods of operation that W.A.G.E. is engaged in?

Lise:

Yes, W.A.G.E.’s activity is very expansive. Looking back, I remember thinking that once we launched W.A.G.E. Certification, the need for consciousness-raising would begin to dissipate and we’d move into enforcement and more policy development. That was not the case and it was naïve to think it would be. I have no previous experience with, or education in, labour organizing but if I had, I would have understood that consciousness-raising is half the work.

Helping people understand where the exploitation is, how it operates on them, and why it should be challenged, will never end as long as the system remains. The trouble is, I’m only one person and one person cannot change the culture of the field. This is where WAGENCY comes in. Its development began in 2015, soon after W.A.G.E. Certification was launched, and it was always intended to decentralize W.A.G.E. by enlisting artists in the work of raising consciousness and pressuring institutions—two of my primary tasks.

Cathrin:

In the ten years since W.A.G.E. was founded, what significant changes have you seen in relation to institutional politics and questions of economics?

Lise:

A shift in W.A.G.E.’s rhetoric over the years in how we describe the class position of artists within the industry reflects art’s near total neoliberalization. Back in 2008, we framed the relationship between artists and institutions as being one of stark disparity, with artists representing an unpaid creative underclass marginalized and exploited by a thriving institutional field. Today, with its impossibly high barriers to entry, the entire field is undeniably elite, catering to a demand for luxury goods and unable to stop the financialization of its output.

Responding to this shift, we now make the case for compensation not on the basis of our distance from a billionaire class, but on the basis of our proximity to it. How we put it to artists is this: If you’re willingly going unpaid by an industry in which you and your work support a billionaire class, then not only are you being exploited, your exploitation is supporting the consolidation of wealth by it. This is how W.A.G.E. argues that the demand to be paid is a political one and we see WAGENCY, and our work over the long term, as being a container for resistance and a politics of labour.

Cathrin:

How does WAGENCY operate on a practical level?

Lise:

WAGENCY is a transactional platform that provides artists with digital tools and the necessary collective agency to negotiate compensation or withhold labour from institutions that decline to pay them according to W.A.G.E. standards. Like a union, WAGENCY requires artists to join and costs \$5/month. Unlike a union, its efficacy depends on the commitment of its individual members to self-regulate by choosing to use WAGENCY each time their labour is contracted. This is how it works: If an artist has been engaged by a nonprofit institution to provide content and wants to be paid according to W.A.G.E. standards, they need to know that institution’s total annual operating expenses. This is because W.A.G.E. fees are calculated using a simple equation: The higher an institution’s expenses, the higher the fee. WAGENCY grants access to a database containing this and other information from the public tax records of thousands of nonprofits across the US. An artist who has joined WAGENCY (a WAGENT) will sign in, look up the contracting institution in our database, and then instantly generate a customized fee schedule for W.A.G.E. fees in 15 categories tailored to the institution’s operating expenses. From that schedule, they

determine the total cost of their labour and send a Fee Request to their contact at the institution through WAGENCY. Fee Requests are made by W.A.G.E. on behalf of artists, so we back up their demands and enable a process of negotiation to take place. WAGENCY instantly certifies WAGENTS who successfully negotiate W.A.G.E. fees or withhold labour from institutions when they decline to pay according to W.A.G.E. standards. Instead of a coordinated strike mechanism, WAGENCY enables a matrix of individual boycotts that can and will happen at any given time. The pressure these individual acts apply to institutions over the long term is the work artists must do collectively to shift the field, but the heavy lifting must be done by those who have cultural, social and economic capital to leverage. When these artists withhold labour they act in support of peers who may not be in a position to command W.A.G.E. fees or turn down work when not paid them. This is a way of correcting existing inequity between individual artists and building much-needed solidarity for ourselves as a workforce.

#### Related organizations

Over the years W.A.G.E. has engaged with many organizations, associations and informal groups dealing with related issues. W.A.G.E. has been lucky to engage with these, and other groups: Art Handlers Alliance, ArtLeaks, Art Workers Council Frankfurt/M, Artist Newsletter (a-n), Artists of Color Bloc, Artists’ Union England, BFAMFAPhD, CARFAC, Common Field, Common Practice New York, Common Practice, London, Compensation Foundation, Cultural ReProducers, Decolonize This Place, Free/Slow University, Glass Bead, Guerrilla Girls, Gulf Labor, G.U.L.F., Haben und Brauchen, HOWDOYOU SAY AMINAFRICAN?, Intern Labor Rights, MayDay Rooms, The Model Alliance, Murphy Institute, Museum Hue, National Writers Union, The Norwegian Association of Curators, Occupy Museums, OWS Arts & Labor, The People’s Cultural Plan, Platform BK, Precarious Workers Brigade, Reko, Scottish Artists Union, Teamsters Local 814, The Young Artists’ Society (UKS), the ILR School of Cornell University’s Arts and Entertainment Worker Resource Center in coalition with Actors’ Equity, American Guild of Musical Artists, IATSE Local 764, IATSE Local 798, Local 600 International Cinematographers Guild, Local 802 Associated Musicians of Greater New York, Writers Guild of America, East, as well as numerous individuals.