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Written for and presented at *Wages of Whiteness in the Art Economy*, a roundtable at Artists Space, NY in December 2016. This event was co-organized by W.A.G.E. and MTL+, with Mabel Wilson, David Joselit, Amin Husain, Eva Mayhabal Davis, Nia Nottage, Sneha Ganguly, and Lise Soskolne (W.A.G.E.). Moderated by Andrew Ross.

Decolonize This Place has been an effort to, among other things, de-center the whiteness that operates art institutions—and in particular the art institution we currently occupy.

In entering into this conversation, I fully recognize W.A.G.E. as its own institution that can and must play a role in de-centering whiteness. A role, because this project is of course much larger than W.A.G.E.—so while I don't want to make W.A.G.E. the focus here, I believe it's my responsibility as its organizer to take seriously the question that's on the table as it relates to W.A.G.E. directly, and that is: **why has W.A.G.E. focused on correcting certain inbuilt inequalities, but hasn't yet incorporated a discussion of the economic underpinnings of white supremacy into its work?**

I want to try and answer this question, but doing so requires me to first articulate the inbuilt inequalities that W.A.G.E. *has* focused on correcting—so I hope you'll follow along as I do the two things that are required of me here: one is to introduce what W.A.G.E. does to those of you who aren't familiar with it, and the other is to account for why W.A.G.E. has chosen to do things the way it has.

This means briefly tracing W.A.G.E.'s history in terms of *strategy*, because its evolution is represented by a series of decisions made around the effort to realize a very specific goal. That goal is the regulated payment of artist fees by the nonprofit institutions that contract the work of artists.

To understand the decision to focus so myopically on what seems relatively inconsequential, given the many levels of structural inequity that characterize the art field, including and especially white supremacy, we have to rewind back to 1969 and to the formation of The Art Workers Coalition.

That's what W.A.G.E. did when it came together in 2008. W.A.G.E. looked at the demands that were made by an open, multiracial coalition of artists, filmmakers, and writers over a period of 3 short years. Their demands targeted museums with an insistence on their reclamation as something like a form of representative democracy, accountable to that era's civil rights, anti-war, and women's movements—asserted through what we might now consider to be the moral rights of artists.

The demands of the Art Workers Coalition were many and they were interlocked. After 3 years of awe inspiring work that called for a redress of the institution in its totality, the coalition fractured in and around its multiplicity of demands. The end result was a

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single concrete policy change: admission-free days at museums that are now corporately sponsored. Noting this, W.A.G.E. chose to work toward a single achievable goal, and one that was germane to the historical moment it had formed around.

That historical moment was early 2008, just before the financial crisis, as the gross excesses of the art market were being concretely felt: sales volumes had expanded by 55% in 2007 alone. W.A.G.E. asserted that artists were being paid in exposure instead of cash money, and that despite our cultural affluence, many were living in relative material poverty—relative to the surrounding excess and to how increasingly unlivable the city was becoming. We demanded to be paid for cultural value in capital value. Without being paid we were being exploited. Exploited because we function as an unpaid labor force that supports a multi-billion dollar industry. So, the argument was made on the basis of artists' economic disenfranchisement as a constituency, as a block—as a *class*.

Fast-forward to 2014, we came up with our own model for compensating artists since W.A.G.E.'s work takes place in the absence of state regulation. We now “certify” those nonprofits that pay fees according to our guidelines and standards. We're banking on institutions to self-regulate and we use what I call “administrative direct action” to remind them that unless they back up the moral and political claims they make through their programs with materially equitable institutional policy, then they are failing as institutions. It's important to note that not unlike artists, nonprofits are uniquely able to get away with murder by using their status as public charities which appear to function outside of the commercial marketplace to obfuscate deeply entrenched biases and inequity, and I would submit that forms of white supremacy are maintained in the arts in precisely this way. Moral supremacy.

But back to W.A.G.E. Certification. As initially proposed, the plan was to also regulate programming and staff constitution by race and gender, and enforce equitable pay scales for all employees. The way I saw it, this was a chance to finally get beyond the myopia of the artist fee, or at least use it to address other connected forms of injustice. But it was collectively decided that making too many demands would mean the failure of the project, and so W.A.G.E. Certification was launched as a program that recognizes equity on hyper-specific economic terms. Race and gender were off the table.

The most important of these are how W.A.G.E. defines ‘Artist’ and what an ‘Artist Fee’ is compensation for. **Artist** is anyone who supplies content in a nonprofit visual arts presenting context and **Artist fees** are the expected remuneration for an artists’

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temporary transactional relationship with an institution to provide that content.
Payment is not for the content itself **but is for its provision**.

Paradoxically, applying this kind of hyper-definition is also a way of emptying out the figure of the artist—artist becomes content provider, artist becomes contracted worker, artist becomes just like everyone else, so that artist stops seeing itself as exceptional and expects to be paid, just like everyone else. This is important because we start to be able to link the previously unpaid work of artists to the low-wage work of art workers without fusing them together since they are in fact different—one is waged labor and the other is not. But what they have in common is that their exploitation takes place *because it is enabled to*.

And this brings us to the present. Over the past year or so W.A.G.E. has been working on a new program called WAGENCY that we expect to launch in the spring. WAGENCY is an effort to organize artists through the formation of a broad-based coalition. At its core is a certification program that certifies artists on the basis of their commitment to only work with those institutions that agree to pay them according to W.A.G.E. standards. We will also hold W.A.G.E. Certified artists accountable for paying equitably those who contribute to producing the content of their work, namely artist assistants but also dancers, actors and so on.

In the process of developing this project it quickly became clear that not all artists can afford to withhold labor and turn down opportunities, and that any effort to organize artists would mean organizing *across class*—this is an inversion of where W.A.G.E. began when it defined artists on the basis of being economically disenfranchised broadly as a constituency, as a block—as a *class*.

The steep class stratification between artists that characterizes the field as a whole today, along with the multiple class positions that can often be active within a single artist, makes WAGENCY's primary function one of providing artists of varying means with the tools and resources to negotiate a fair deal or to withhold content when necessary, and to do so collectively and in solidarity with one another. I describe WAGENCY as a matrix of individual boycotts, and as a new form of labor organizing for an atomized and unpaid workforce. It is based on principles of self-organization that are grounded in collective mobilization, and it's also an effort to decentralize W.A.G.E. as an organization.

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On the one hand WAGENCY could provide means of self-regulation, self-organization, and a kind of self-determination, but its introduction is happening concurrently with the urgency of both artists and institutions to engage in processes of de-centering, de-centralization, and de-colonization.

I need to think more about this intersection. And in the meantime, the question persists, and still I haven't really answered it: **Why has W.A.G.E. focused on correcting certain inbuilt inequalities, but hasn't yet incorporated a discussion of the economic underpinnings of white supremacy into its work?**

It occurs to me that the work of W.A.G.E. has been a long process of emptying out the constructed figure of the 'Artist' (as an economic subject) so that it may contain other forms of self-definition beyond those which have been provided for and by us, and which keep us in the position of being exploited and of exploiting ourselves. W.A.G.E. now proposes filling up this container with the hyper specificity of 'content provider' when we engage in a very particular labor relation with the institutions that contract our work. But 'Artist' can equally be filled up with other forms of self-identification. So, I wonder if this process of emptying out and reconstituting what it means to be an artist has itself been a necessary process of decolonization, but one that will lead to a reckoning with the persistence of white supremacy in the art field *and* to its rectification, but only as long as it is the implicit responsibility of anyone and everyone who lays claim to 'Artist' as an identity.