

W.A.G.E.N.C.Y.

W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)

W.A.G.E.'s invitation to contribute to *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* was preceded by a separate invitation from the publication's editorial team to Lise Soskolne, core organizer of W.A.G.E., to reprint a text of her own writing, "Who Owns a Vacant Lot? Orthodoxy vs. Culture Industry." The editors did not initially revise their standard offer of remuneration for reprints to meet W.A.G.E.'s guidelines for reprints of artists' texts, despite an awareness that they might be asked to do so. What follows is documentation of the editors' original invitation, which was received in the form of an email—as well as the response it generated (with minimal redactions), one that now represents the first demand for equitable compensation by a W.A.G.E. Certified individual.

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Dear Lise,

We are writing to ask permission to reprint your essay "Who Owns a Vacant Lot? Orthodoxy vs. Culture Industry" in an edited volume titled *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, which will be copublished by the New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press in 2016 as part of the newly revived Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture series. More information about the series and its funding is included in the attached press release.

Public Servants aims to consider changes in the role of artistic production and reception within a broader cultural context of diminishing public resources and services. Distinct from examinations of "public practice" or "socially engaged art," *Public Servants* will ask key questions about the role of culture at a moment when radical economic, political, and global shifts are literally reconfiguring what the word "public" means, and how it is addressed. The volume is coedited by Johanna

Burton (Keith Haring Director and Curator of Education and Public Engagement, the New Museum); Shannon Jackson (Director, Arts Research Center, and Goldman Professor, Rhetoric and TDPS, the University of California, Berkeley); and Dominic Willson (Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education & Public Practice, SFMOMA).

Please find a more thorough description of *Public Servants* and the Critical Anthologies series in the attached invitation letter. We would be thrilled to include your essay in this volume. If you will give us permission, please fill out and return the attached form to Kaegan Sparks, Publication Associate, who is copied here.

Also, we would appreciate your putting us in contact with the essay's original publishers, so that we may seek their permission as well.

We can offer you a small fee of \$250 for the essay's inclusion. However, if possible, we ask you to consider waiving this fee due to the scholarly nature of this project, and the fact that the New Museum and MIT Press are nonprofit organizations.

Please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions you may have about this volume or the series. We look forward to including your crucial voice in *Public Servants*.

Very best wishes,
Johanna, Shannon, and Dominic

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Dear Johanna, Shannon, and Dominic,

Thank you for the invitation to reprint "Who Owns a Vacant Lot? Orthodoxy vs. Culture Industry" in the forthcoming publication *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*. My answer is: yes, I would be pleased to give permission for it to be included.

Thank you also for including some supporting documentation. It gave me a better understanding of the context for the publication—both in terms of its content, and how it is to be financed.

As you may know, I am an artist and core organizer of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), an activist organization founded in 2008 that advocates for the regulated payment of artist fees by the nonprofit institutions that contract the labor of artists. As such, I could not help but be struck by the concluding phrase in your invitation: "We can offer you a small fee of \$250 for the essay's inclusion. However, if possible, we ask you to consider waiving this fee

due to the scholarly nature of this project, and the fact that the New Museum and MIT Press are nonprofit organizations.”

Being asked to forfeit this nominal fee of course strikes me as ironic given the nature of the work I do and have done for many years—including at Industry City, which is the subject of the text you seek permission to reprint—but particularly so given that the supporting documentation discloses that there is a significant amount of funding for this project. While I fully understand that the \$500,000 Mellon grant does not represent the budget for this single publication, it does indicate that funding has indeed been secured, but your suggestion that I might forgo the fee indicates also that compensation for those who supply the content and without whom the publication would not be possible, has not been budgeted for.

While I found this ironic I did not find it surprising. W.A.G.E. exists to change precisely these conditions. In October 2014, we established a certification program that “certifies” those nonprofits voluntarily paying artist fees meeting minimum payment standards. These standards were established by W.A.G.E. over a period of several years in dialog with arts organizations, writers, sociologists, labor historians, and critical theorists. W.A.G.E. Certification is the first model of its kind in the U.S. that establishes a sector-wide minimum standard for compensation, as well as a clear set of guidelines and standards for the conditions under which artistic labor is contracted. Ours is a scalable model that can be applied across the nonprofit arts economy in all its variation: from small artist-run spaces struggling to support a single employee to large institutions with hundreds of full-time workers and top salaries in the seven figures.

Our fee calculator includes a database of over fifty such organizations, including the New Museum, and as the person who constructed that database I am familiar with the museum’s total annual operating expenses, [REDACTED]

W.A.G.E. Certification outlines fourteen fee categories for which we have established payment standards, including one for ‘Existing Text for Publication’. According to our calculator, the rate of compensation for the reprint of my essay would be, at minimum, ten cents per word. My essay is 5000 words so this would amount to \$500. Our *recommended* rate for the New Museum would be calculated against its total annual operating expenses [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. At twenty-three cents per word the recommended fee would have amounted to \$1,150 last year.

Since the New Museum is not W.A.G.E. Certified, I cannot reasonably expect to be paid according to our guidelines—and this is why we are currently in the process of developing a certification program for individual artists. Under this

program, artists would be certified on the basis of their commitment to work with nonprofit organizations only on the condition that they be compensated according to W.A.G.E.'s standards.

Thus your offer presented an opportunity to experience firsthand what it would mean to be a W.A.G.E. Certified artist. After several hours of feeling duly gratified by your invitation, with its implicit confirmation that there is something of value in my work, and that I, and it, must be exceptional because of that, I experienced a series of uncomfortable and frankly desperate sensations, that I only knew anecdotally from other artists, all of which occurred in the space of approximately twenty seconds.

Upon recognizing that practicing the politics I espouse both personally and professionally would necessarily mean risking an opportunity to be included in a prestigious scholarly publication, I felt a sense of despair, quickly followed by an acute sense of panic that this opportunity would never come again; this was a fork in the road and I would have no choice but to take the short path to obscurity if I asked for compensation according to guidelines that I was responsible for establishing. Then I thought: but my essay is singular, nobody else could have written it. I am not interchangeable with other artists and neither is my work, and this is my leverage in expecting and asking to be compensated fairly. There might still be a way for me to get what I want, I thought, and simultaneously practice a respectable politics. For a brief moment I was sure that the museum would understand and respond favorably, even though I would still feel ashamed of having to bring it up. And then I remembered that my essay is one of thirty-six in this book and it could easily be eliminated as a sub-section. Coming to terms with the fact that I have little to no leverage induced a bitter disappointment, revealing what I knew all along to be true: I wanted to say yes because I wanted more than anything to be included in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*.

The soft optimism produced by being clear and honest with myself quickly gave way to a tough resignation when I remembered that a text I had written for W.A.G.E. had just been published by e-flux the day before. In it, I argued that "artists must acknowledge that their labor is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by a multibillion-dollar industry, while simultaneously putting their exceptionality to work by engaging their own labor on political terms, and as a political act." This is an oblique reference to what being a W.A.G.E. Certified artist would imply and require. As I learned in that eventful twenty seconds, being a W.A.G.E. Certified artist would require me to risk a significant career opportunity and in doing so I would come to fully understand what is actually at stake—not just for myself as an individual artist, but for the entire field. I knew

then, very palpably, that the rectification of its inherently exploitative labor practices is not incumbent upon institutions alone, it is equally the responsibility of artists, and it would have to start with me.

On that basis, I am still very happy to give permission for the reprint of my essay, but I will not be able to forfeit the \$250 reprint fee and in fact must ask for \$500. I thank you for the invitation, and for helping me to clarify why W.A.G.E. Certifying individual artists is absolutely necessary.

Very best,
Lise



W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), "W.A.G.E. Member" card, 2009/2015 (front)

W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) works to draw attention to economic inequalities that exist in the arts, and to resolve them. W.A.G.E. has been formed because we, as visual + performance artists and independent curators, provide a work force. W.A.G.E. recognizes the organized irresponsibility of the art market and its supporting institutions, and demands an end of the refusal to pay fees for the work we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction. W.A.G.E. refutes the positioning of the artist as a speculator and calls for the remuneration of cultural value in capital value. W.A.G.E. believes that the promise of exposure is a liability in a system that denies the value of our labor. As an unpaid labor force within a robust art market from which others profit greatly, W.A.G.E. recognizes an inherent exploitation and demands compensation. W.A.G.E. calls for an address of the economic inequalities that are prevalent, and proactively preventing the art worker's ability to survive within the greater economy. We demand payment for making the world more interesting.

Lise Soskolne member

W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), "W.A.G.E. Member" card, 2009/2015 (back)

W.A.G.E.'s contribution to *Public Servants* resulted from core organizer Lise Soskolne's correspondence with the volume's editors.