

Labor Movement

NATO THOMPSON INTERVIEWS W.A.G.E.

IT'S A CURIOUS TWIST in the history of art that de-skilling—the reduction of the once-hallowed making of art to the level of performing the mundane task of the day—has cut both ways. When Seurat famously said he just wanted to be paid by the hour, he was cannily acknowledging the routinization and commodification of all forms of experience in the advent of modernity, and at the same time attempting to defy bourgeois notions of artistic virtuosity and to undermine the traditional value of art itself. But three-quarters of a century later, amid the birth of institutional critique and the labor movements of the 1960s, the Art Workers' Coalition would paradoxically marry radical politics with rather conventional economics, at once protesting and embracing the commodification of artistic labor. W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) has emerged in the wake of these bipolar shifts. The group was founded in 2008 to agitate against economic inequities—specifically focusing on winning financial compensation for artists from art institutions. But would such a transaction merely place a fixed, quantitative value on artistic labor once more, and would the de facto result be institutions trading aesthetic risk for safety? Or does the effort represent a relentless pragmatism in the face of so many failed utopias? Nato Thompson, chief curator at Creative Time in New York, interviewed W.A.G.E. organizers A. K. Burns, KB Hardy, Lise Soskolne, and A. L. Steiner to plumb the complexities and possibilities surrounding their project.

NATO THOMPSON: Let's start with your first real negotiation with an institution, which is your negotiation with the New Museum over the "Free" exhibition. It brings up many issues surrounding cultural capital and artistic labor.

W.A.G.E.: "W.A.G.E. certification" is an idea we've been tossing around for a while in terms of an active agenda. There are a lot of questions—how does W.A.G.E. function? What is our purpose and where are we going, and what will we do beyond talking and expanding our understanding of how the art economy works?

"Free" gave us the opportunity to put some of this into practice. Lauren Cornell, the curator, asked us to contribute work to the show. But we're an activist

group, so we proposed participating in the show not with an artwork but by negotiating fees for artists. Our main goal is discussing artists' compensation for working with institutions. We asked for several things, one of which was for the budget of the show to be transparent. In the end, it wasn't made public; it was discussed with us internally. Transparency is terrifying. It's not a comfortable place. But the negotiation did accomplish something: We secured fees for each artist separate from their expense budgets.

NT: And were the fees the same across the board?

W.A.G.E.: Yes.

NT: Did you stipulate a minimum amount?

W.A.G.E.: No. For us the goal was really the fee, because this was the first time we were crossing this bridge. We didn't care if it was five dollars or five thousand dollars; we just wanted the symbolic gesture to take place, that fees could be included for the artists in the show. We wanted to find out whether this institution would include this in their exhibition budget and how that would work.

The fact that we were successful in undergoing negotiations just means that the possibility is there and that the language we worked so hard to develop over the past two years to explain our experience to our community and with our community, to bring those concerns to the forefront, can be part of an institutional agenda. And so there was a notice at the entrance to the show that said it was a W.A.G.E.-CERTIFIED EXHIBITION.

When we saw the budget, it wasn't shocking to us. The thing that we already knew was that all the vendors, all the freelancers, all the contractors, are paid for their work. When the line item was added for artist fees, that was the moment when we realized: Here it is, it works, and it exists.

NT: How does the negotiation and mobilization work? It's very difficult to convert speech into action; the growth of social capital has led to a massive erosion in trust regarding dialogue or speech.

W.A.G.E.: We are networking and reaching out to the



Dean Daderko preparing a complaint, suggestions, and donation box for W.A.G.E.'s booth at No Soul for Sale: A Festival of Independents, X Initiative, New York, June 22, 2009.

community in different ways. So far we've done it in open meetings, panels, conferences, and teach-ins. But our main initiative now is the "W.A.G.E. survey," which gathers data from artists about their economic experiences with nonprofit institutions in New York City. With this information from a broad base of artists, we will have more leverage with institutions.

Approximately 2 percent of artists live solely off the sale of their work in the commercial marketplace, a figure we've derived from the Columbia University Research Center for Arts and Culture's "Information on Artists" report. So 98 percent of that pool have to survive in other ways—multiple jobs, etc. Our dialogue is exactly about that situation, and how it relates to the responsibility of the art institution, not the commercial gallery market. What is the role and ethical responsibility of the art institution regarding the welfare of the arts community? Is it only to pay commercial vendors that are outside the arts community, or is it also to include artists within the



W.A.G.E. poster for "Consciousness Coffee Klatch" at the NY Art Book Fair, MOMA PSL, New York, October 3, 2009.

scope of their budgets, their projections, and essentially their agenda—their mission statement?

NT: There's a long history of bringing the language of labor negotiation into this field. What is your relationship to this historical precedent; how do you see the 1960s and '70s in comparison?

W.A.G.E.: When we were first formulating ideas around W.A.G.E., we decided to look specifically at the Art Workers' Coalition. Their agenda was incredibly important and ambitious—including labor issues, protesting Vietnam, and agitating against racial inequality. We were concerned that when your focus is too dispersed, that when what you are trying to achieve is too broad, you—

NT:—lose momentum.

W.A.G.E.: Yes, to maintain momentum or to achieve a single goal becomes much more complicated.

NT: One of the critiques that gets leveled against W.A.G.E. is: Why just artists? Why agitate within the arts, which is seen as a largely privileged, predominantly white, middle-class constituency—and for whom discussions

about labor are divorced from the conditions of mass disenfranchisement, to say the least?

W.A.G.E.: The question was simply, What do *we* need? We need to be paid for our work at institutions. Here's a single goal, and we will work on that single goal until we get there. If you want to talk about class issues and art, nothing speaks to class disparity more than assuming that an artist is privileged enough to afford to not be paid for their work. We just want to have this realistic, specific focus, and we do include independent curators, performers, and writers in our advocacy.

NT: What's in it for the art institution?

W.A.G.E.: To create a culture of mutual respect. What's not to like about being ethical?

NT: It's as if you're trying to envision a union that has no specialized skill set.

W.A.G.E.: We are not trying to unionize, although we are organizing toward our goals. When we say we are raising consciousness, part of that is talking to artists, asking one another to value our own work, asking to be paid for it, asking to be respected and not to consider ourselves replaceable. And to have insight regarding the larger picture. The system implies that we are inter-

changeable, and we're not.

NT: Are there other issues beyond the artist fee? Issues surrounding the role of culture itself?

W.A.G.E.: What we're saying is that there is a certain contractual agreement for services rendered in the rest of our capitalist culture. Why is the artist an exception? The discussion about how an economy works has to take place within that community. We are asking institutions to engage in the first step of self-regulation. We're simply stating that payment has to be part of an artist's experience with an institution. We are starting these negotiations through W.A.G.E. certification.

NT: Are there other particular line items—points of negotiation you feel are critical to the institution's relationship to an artist?

W.A.G.E.: Copyright and resale are important issues, but it seems like part of our second phase. It's really a broader question of payment standards.

NT: You're talking about a safety net. Do you feel that all this is necessary because of the erosion of the safety net from the state and from large private sources? There

"The system implies that artists are interchangeable, and we're not."

—W.A.G.E.

are resources in other fields that simply do not exist for artists anymore.

We could look at the '50s, that generation that went to art school on the GI Bill, for example. A huge number of them could not have done what they did without being on the bill. It goes back to the removal of a certain level of safety net that occurred in the past couple of decades—we're dealing with that fallout now.

W.A.G.E.: It's interesting that there is a base fee with the Screen Actors Guild. Sure, someone makes twenty million dollars and it seems exorbitant, but there is that other 98 percent of actors who are making residuals. They have their union negotiate that. Would actors be working for free if they didn't have a union? Of course they would. They would be in the same position visual artists are in.

NT: But what about the National Endowment for the Arts? What about the idea of having the state actually fund individual artists? Is that a dead dream?

W.A.G.E.: The dream is alive and well. It's the reality that's problematic. We need to start a new dialogue that builds on past models of artist empowerment and ethical payment standards.

NT: But it is a strange moment, because it presses the question of privatization. A lot of what you were saying runs counter to so many of the attitudes you, as artists, might have toward artwork in general, or the aim of the historical avant-gardes or radically critical practices.

W.A.G.E.: Critical practice or not, most artists have to cobble together a living and use social capital as a means of advancement. The commercial art market operates through speculation, and nonprofits should exist as a parallel system that can provide income that's not affected by speculation, but in general they don't. Speculation is gambling, and gambling is enforced by the current system of nonpayment. This does not guarantee income and is not a viable option.

NT: It's an issue of who can afford to just subsist on social capital.

W.A.G.E.: Right. If there were a base fee, it would actually create a different kind of avant-garde, because you would open up the crevices of the art world to those who haven't had the privilege of participating. □