



W.A.G.E.

**Working Artists
and the Greater Economy**

FAQs

ART FRONT

NOVEMBER 1934



ARTISTS UNION

5¢

*The first issue was revised, basically, and contained only organizational articles.
For purposes of information, the Artist Committee of Action was dissolved a few months later, and their members joined the Artists Union.*

How and why did W.A.G.E. begin?

Working Artists and the Greater Economy began as a conversation between a small group of friends, some of whose work had generated noticeable cultural capital, asking each other: why are we always broke, and from which of our multiple jobs are we deriving our income? Why do exhibitors want to work with us, show our work, want us in magazines, to do performances, but won't financially compensate us for the labor it takes to maintain our cultural capital?

We began to realize there was no consistency in the type of remuneration that institutions provided and when we really began to examine the problem, we realized that there was a systemic blind spot within institutions that was writing artists out of the economic equation. Then we wondered what could be done.

W.A.G.E. was formed in the spring of 2008 with the writing of the wo/manifesto. That fall, three organizers of W.A.G.E. spoke at Creative Time's 'Democracy in America' Summit, launching the group publicly via political speeches that contextualized our core issues. This public appeal broke the silence and cleared a path toward building solidarities and leveraging options for change.

Over the next several months W.A.G.E. organized and facilitated a series of public meetings at Judson Church that resulted in the formulation of specific goals and concrete proposals, one of which was the suggestion to survey artists to find out definitively whether they were or were not receiving fees, above their expenses, when working with non-profits. These early public meetings solidified a core group and galvanized a community that was united by a fundamental sense of inequity. From that point on, W.A.G.E. received regular invitations to speak out, evolving into a consciousness-raising group by participating in as many talks, teach-ins, events, workshops and interviews as possible.

Is W.A.G.E. an art project?

W.A.G.E. is comprised of practicing artists, but we are not an art collective and our work is not art. We are an activist and advocacy group. Our participation is never in the capacity of being artists; we may use performative strategies or our skills as artists to craft messages and deploy them strategically, but what we are advocating is policy change—not symbolic change, but actual systemic change. W.A.G.E.'s advocacy for the payment of artist fees is a singular issue but one which represents a broader and entrenched set of problems related to the non-remuneration of cultural labor. We address these problems by calling attention to the economic wellbeing of a diversified arts community through ethics and equity.

Why should non-profits be expected to pay artist fees?

Even though non-profit arts institutions are by definition public charities, they do not operate in relationship to cultural producers as charity providers. Cultural producers serve as content providers and educators and, like all other outside vendors and subcontractors with whom a non-profit works, they must receive payment and the coverage of expenses regardless of their cultural capital, commercial market value or career status. How each project is negotiated with each artist, collective, lecturer, independent curator, writer or performer can take whatever form the project requires, but the provision of artist fees and their inclusion as a distinct line item in an institution's operating budget is a necessity.



Why don't non-profits pay artist fees?

For the most part we assume—and have experienced firsthand—that non-profits are dedicated to supporting the work of artists. Artist fees are not consistently offered for a number of different reasons.

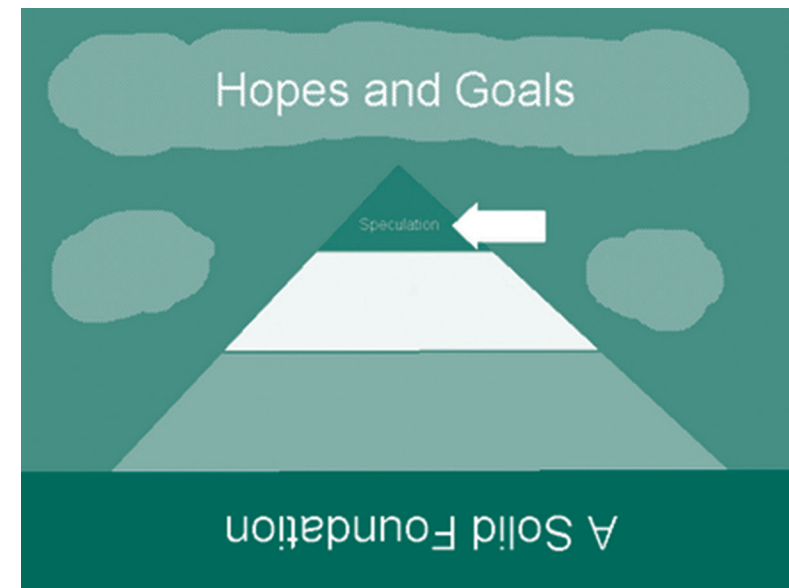
One of the most obvious is that there are no existing guidelines for what is appropriate, realistic, ethical, and anticipated. The provision of an artist fee is therefore denied, ignored or postponed, and if paid, is done so arbitrarily.

Another reason is that both cultural producers and arts administrators mistake the cultural producer's role as an educator for one of a speculator. As a result, artists often find themselves working for exposure and cultural capital instead of actual capital. Artists and institutions are complicit in sacrificing the negotiation of payment for an exchange that is inappropriate to the context in which they're working: investing time, resources and labor in the future possibility of sales is the gaming territory of commercial markets. The co-existence of the commercial marketplace does not relieve the non-profit sector of its responsibility to provide remuneration to contractors and vendors, of which cultural producers are one.

Even if artist fees or honoraria are paid, they may implicitly or explicitly include the coverage of expenses associated with the production and installation of the work. To make matters worse, the designated amount may be arbitrary, having little to do with the actual costs associated with production. So, not only does the fee or honorarium not even fully cover expenses, it fully subsumes into the cost of production into what may have started out as an artist fee into the cost of production itself—not fully covering costs nor providing a fee. Within this equation artists rarely break even, and often expend their own resources above and beyond what the institution provides.

The omission of 'Artist Fees' as its own distinct line item in the operating budgets of non-profit organizations obfuscates and compounds the problem. Personnel, Rent, Travel, Marketing and even Entertainment costs constitute their own line items that are budgeted for as annual expenses. Because Artist Fees are absorbed into other line items like Production Costs or Outside Professional Services, they are hidden from view. One of the tenets of W.A.G.E. Certification is the explicit provision of artist fees as their own distinct line item.

If this very small change became standard practice, both internally within organizations and as a requirement by funders, it would signify a major shift toward the kind of equity and transparency that would literally reveal artists being written back into the equation. There is no enforceable industry standard or law applied to how institutional budgets are structured, but W.A.G.E. advocates that fees must be included within them.



MISSING

Subtotal

TOTAL INCOME

EXPENSES

Administrative Personnel:

Salaries

Benefits

Artistic Personnel:

Salaries

Benefits

Public Programming Personnel:

Salaries

Benefits

Artist Fees and Honoraria

Outside Professional Services

Space, Utilities & Maintenance

Exhibition Production Costs

Public Program Costs

Publishing

LINE ITEM

**‘Artist Fees and Honoraria’
missing from operating budget.**

If found please contact W.A.G.E.!
info@wageforwork.com

What is W.A.G.E. Certification?

The payment of artist fees by New York-based non-profit arts organizations has never been mandated by city, state, or national legislation, nor has it been enforced by the government agencies and private foundations that provide financial support to non-profits through the grant-making process. Non-profit arts organizations dispense artist fees and exhibition support according to an honor system that is inconsistent with the many other regulatory standards by which the activities of non-profit organizations are measured and mandated.

While fees and the costs incurred by artists in mounting exhibitions are often included in the proposed budgets that non-profits submit to grant makers with their requests for funding, there currently exists no means of verifying that artists in fact receive the funds that have been earmarked for them. Without any checks or balances between artists and institutions, and between institutions and their funders, this system functions at worst punitively and unethically, and at best inconsistently.

In 2011, we initiated W.A.G.E. Certification, a program that will recognize non-profit arts organizations that adhere to a set of self-regulatory initiatives. These include following a best practices model and demonstrating a history of, and commitment to, paying artist fees that meet a minimum payment standard relative to the size of an organization’s annual operating budget.

W.A.G.E. Certification is a voluntary program. Organizations choosing to be certified are those that have made a commitment to operate ethically in relation to artists and wish to have this commitment acknowledged by their community. W.A.G.E. Certification signals to artists not only a guarantee that they will be compensated for their work but also that the organization stands in solidarity with them in their fight to get paid as part of an equitable community, regardless of their speculative value or material practice. Beyond strengthening the relationship between artists and institutions, Certification sends a strong signal to other organizations that the practice of non-payment is neither acceptable nor inevitable.

What are the differences between W.A.G.E. and CARFAC?

CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/ Le Front des artistes canadiens) is a useful and productive model for W.A.G.E. We have been in consistent communication and support each other's work. CARFAC was formed in Canada in 1968 and started from the same place that W.A.G.E. began in 2008—artist's frustration with an untenable and unjust labor model for cultural producers and presenters.

Today, CARFAC has support from the Canadian government through the provision of the Exhibition Right in the Copyright Act, which mandates the payment of fees when work is shown in a non-commercial context by non-profit organizations and 'artist-run spaces'. Additionally, if these organizations don't pay exhibition fees, their funding may be withheld and their livelihood threatened—this leverage is possible in Canada because non-profit organizations rely heavily on revenues from the provincial and federal governments. All of these benefits come as a result of decades of persistence by CARFAC working at a grassroots level to ensure that artists are fairly compensated according to the rates they recommend.

In the U.S., significant decreases in government funding since the culture wars of the 1990s has meant that non-profits in the U.S. now tend to derive their revenue from a mix of public and private funds, earned income and individual donors. Regulating the payment of artist fees by local, state and federal agencies as CARFAC does would have little impact on artists in the U.S. because government support comprises a relatively small portion of funding. However, regulating the funding criteria of the private foundations upon which most non-profits have greater reliance could make a difference. Because private foundations are not subject to external regulation, it would

require them to self-regulate: they could choose to withhold funding from organizations that do not provide proof of having paid artist fees (in the form of cancelled checks along with the inclusion of the fee as line item). Pressure on non-profits to self-regulate would come from both W.A.G.E. Certification, and from funders if they chose to self-regulate their giving priorities in favor of supporting the remuneration of artists.

CARFAC's 2012 policy, which includes a Minimum Recommended Fee Schedule, was developed in 2007 through negotiations between CARFAC and Regroupement des artistes en arts visuels (RAAV) together with the Canadian Art Museum Directors' Organization (CAMDO) and the Canadian Museums Association (CMA), using a retired justice of the Supreme Court of Ontario as mediator. CARFAC recommends different fees based on a number of criteria including the size of an organization's operating budget. For this, CARFAC determined two categories: above \$500,000 and below \$500,000. W.A.G.E.'s fee schedule will include a similar distinction, because without this provision, smaller organizations unable to afford to pay fees could be adversely impacted. W.A.G.E. is aiming for all arts organizations to be able to receive W.A.G.E. Certification, and are working to make this possible.

Like CARFAC in its early formation, W.A.G.E. advocates for change from the bottom up: a voluntary and self-sustaining shift in relations between artists and institutions.

Within the current climate of backlash against workers, what transformations or changes are possible in the way non-profit arts organizations support artists and artworkers, and what kinds of alliances would be necessary?

As a cultural shift, the transformation of art fully into an industry like any other via the commodification of every aspect of its constituent parts ranging from the studio to the museum, has already taken place. A recent economic shift is the increasing 'financialization' of this industry through its use as an instrument by investors seeking new ways of generating capital. The flooding of funds through auction houses, commercial galleries and large-scale capital projects will likely result in the overall impression that artists are financially secure and even prospering, conditioning the public to believe that there isn't any urgency and necessity for change within the non-profit sector.

A backlash of social conservatism and gridlock in Washington indicates that support for artists and artworkers needs to be generated through those within the industry that are participants and care for or have a vested interest in the well-being of the arts community. Perhaps the most fundamental alliance necessary to forging change is between artists. A winner-takes-all system that revolves around competition makes solidarity-building within artist communities challenging. What W.A.G.E. proposes is building a solidarity-based arts community in which artists who have found cultural and/or capital success stand with those who continue to strive; and all artists stand in solidarity with those who are essential to the production of their work—directors, curators, art handlers, administrators, gallery workers, and assistants, among many others.

In this regard, an unexpected but empowering outcome of the condition of precarity is that artists find themselves working within the industry in order to support their practices. Those who double as artist/art handler, artist/curator, artist/administrator have not only a greater than average investment in the well-being of artists on both the institutional and production ends, they also have useful knowledge about how the system functions. They are vital linkages in a chain of alliances that begins with artists at the 'ground zero' of production, leading up to those with the power to make policy change.

Another important constituency is academia, in which teachers, artists, curators, critics, historians and others who invest their skills in pedagogy have influence over the expectations of their students. The academy may prepare cultural producers to participate in the marketplace artistically and discursively, but these skills come at a high price. Educators contribute to economic justice in the arts by raising awareness of it in their curricula. The omission of information regarding debt, competition for resources and low incomes is unacceptable, especially in the context of the current dialogue regarding the cultural economy both inside and outside of academia.

And lastly, ethical financial support for artists by the private sector—both foundations and corporate funders—sends a strong signal to the art world and to legislators.



What can I do to get paid?

ALWAYS ASK IF THERE IS AN ARTIST FEE: If an institution wants to work with you, ask any if there is an artist fee before agreeing to participate. When contracted by a non-profit arts organization you are considered an outside vendor/contractor serving as an educator/content provider. Remember that an artist fee or honorarium is distinctly separate from negotiations regarding production, travel, shipping and material expenses. *Not asking* allows inequity and unethical behavior to flourish.

PROMOTE PEER-TO-PEER TRANSPARENCY: If it's a group exhibition, find out who the other artists are or contact people who have worked with that institution and inquire as to how or what their negotiations were; likewise, if you're contacted by a colleague or peer with questions regarding payment and negotiations, be open, honest and transparent. The old adage that 'knowledge is power' is the truth, and the more we support each other, the stronger our community will be. Solidarity, not competition, are the building blocks of strength, equity and empowerment.

UTILIZE W.A.G.E.: Simply signing your email correspondence with the W.A.G.E. website (www.wageforwork.com) sends a message of consciousness, action and clarity to those you work with. Our wo/manifesto is a simple, useful tool that makes clear the need for remuneration. Spread the word and make it known that you're informed about—and conscious of—the economic system in which you're participating.

JOIN W.A.G.E.: Add your name to the Supporters page on our website to publicly stand in solidarity with W.A.G.E.'s cause. The greater our coalition, the greater our ability to implement change.

CONTACT US: We may be able to assist or advise you. Our resources are currently limited but we try to help when possible, and hope to offer advocacy and negotiation services in the near future. Please visit us, sign up for our mailing list, spread the word and/or donate through our website.

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W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), 2012
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