

CAN ARTISTS ORGANIZE? THE STORY OF WAGE

By Sarah Cowan

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In 2016, the multidisciplinary artist Devin Kenny's work was screened in a video program at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Hito Steyerl, one of the show's more established artists, forfeited her fee so that others could have higher compensation. "I thought that was so epic," Kenny said. "It was a small amount, but it actually benefitted me greatly and made a big impact." Kenny had graduated from the M.F.A. program at U.C.L.A. just three years before. He received his degree without incurring egregious debt, unlike many of his peers. And yet, in terms of finances, Kenny is like many artists who tend to blur the boundary between work and life. When I asked if the moca fee was for production costs or for his cost of living, he said, "What's the difference? **I'm constantly making art, so that money—whether it's going towards a medical bill or a sandwich or an art supply—is going towards art.**"

Kenny credits the activist nonprofit organization Working Artists and the Greater Economy (better known as wage) with raising his consciousness about the inequity in the art world. The information about artist fees and negotiating tools available on their Web site became resources that he could use to measure his worth. "When you're just beginning, you feel very nervous about communicating your needs. You need to know how to negotiate, and you need to know the value of the work that you do and how that work adds value to whatever institution is showcasing it," he said. "Examples that crystallize it for me, beyond an art-world experience, are viral content. People perform particular actions that circulate, and then they don't have a means to capitalize off of the wild popularity of the thing that they made or are featured in. Particularly, I'm thinking of black youth who make particular platforms desirable to be a part of, whether it be Twitter or Instagram or Facebook or YouTube, and they are largely not being compensated. So that's an even more concrete example that's part of mainstream culture, where this is a person who's famous but broke." In the art world, he said, "Institutions pay you with exposure, and there is a certain currency to being an emerging artist. However, it doesn't protect you from exploitation."

wage's primary focus since 2014 has been on granting a certification to arts nonprofits that pay artists according to standardized rates. wage uses each organization's total operating expenses to calculate appropriate fees in fifteen categories, including participation in solo or group exhibitions, performances, commissioned and existing texts and talks, screenings with in-person appearances, and day rates for performers. Sixty-one organizations have been certified so far, and, last March, Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art became the first museum to join the list.

Kate Kraczon, a curator at the ICA Philadelphia who was instrumental in certifying that museum, told me over the phone that when paying artist fees, she often implores artists, "**This honorarium is for your labor, for your bills, for groceries, for rent. I prefer you not spend it on materials for this project.**" Many artists are willing to use their fees to enhance their work beyond the capacity of a museum budget. "I encourage them not to go out of pocket," Kraczon said, "but you can't control that."

wagency, which launched in September, is the next phase for the advocacy group, and it shifts the burden of responsibility for ensuring fair pay from institutions to artists. As members of the program (or wagents), artists will pay five dollars a month to gain access to an online platform through which they can calculate and request fees from institutions that invite them to give a talk or show a work of art. Each request is then inserted into a form letter, emblazoned with the wage logo, and e-mailed directly to the artist's contact at the institution. The institution is given a choice of two responses: approve or negotiate. When an artist refuses to accept a fee below the requested amount, they are invited to add their name to a list of Certified wagents, made public online.

In many professional fields, the concept of negotiating a fee for services is standard operating procedure. But, in the fields of visual and performing arts, it is less common. The mission of wagency is to defang the process by standardizing and depersonalizing it. Unlike a union, wagency does not promote collective bargaining, nor does it employ representatives to oversee and mediate negotiations. Instead, it is a campaign of self-regulation and mutual accountability. As a workforce, artists are heterogeneous and atomized, working with many different institutions in the course of their careers. Artists who sign up will have to negotiate on their own behalfs, with the blind hope that others are doing the same. The question is whether there are enough artists who are determined to see their names among those of other wagents or who will make collaboration integral to their artistic practices. And there's the question of how receptive arts organizations will be to these demands.

In Kenny's experience, artists' paths to financial success, or at least to financial stability, are limited and rarely discussed in educational settings. "In the United States, it seems there are these archetypal tracks," he said. "One of which is that you come out the gate, do some shows, meet some dealers, get representation in at least one major city and then in several other cities, and you just continue to build up your collector base." That option is most readily available to painters, whose work can be bought and resold rapidly. Other mediums tend not to circulate in the market at the same pace. The dealer-and-gallery route can be volatile, and there's a delicate balance between finding success and becoming too attractive to collectors. (The Web site ArtRank.com lists artists, ticker-tape-like, in categories of "buy" and "sell." "It's super brutal," Kenny said.) The other track is teaching. "You get an M.F.A., work as a visiting artist or teaching fellow, then become an adjunct professor for at least five years, then assistant and then associate and then full professor, and then try to get tenure," Kenny explained. There are alternatives, such as working in a museum or gallery, or as a high-school teacher; but, to survive, most artists push their work in the direction of one of the two main tracks. If standardized fees could be expected when exhibiting work or participating in public programming, a more reliable support system might be established.

Though wage's philosophy is most aligned with Wages for Housework, the nineteen-seventies feminist movement that campaigned for compensation for childcare and housework, the organization is also part of a lineage of artists who have attempted to organize themselves. In the early seventies, artists' contracts developed by the art dealer Seth Siegelaub and the Art Workers' Coalition (A.W.C.) proposed a configuration much like the music industry's royalties system, in which the exhibition and resale of a work continue to benefit and be controlled by the artist. Those initiatives arose out of the politics of the sixties and ended up being most successful as consciousness-raising acts. The art critic Lucy Lippard, a member of the A.W.C., wrote a reflection on the organization in 1970. "More important than any of our 'concrete' achievements," she wrote, "is the fact that whether or not we are popular for it, the Coalition has brought up issues that American artists (since the 1930s) have failed to confront together, issues concerning the dignity and value of art and artist in a world that often thinks neither has either." On measuring success, she wrote, "If the American artist looks with increased awareness at his shows, sales, conferences, contracts as an autonomous and independent member, even mover, of his own system, the AWC has made sense."

Over the years, Canada's carfac, Germany's Professional Association of Visual Artists Berlin (BBK), Spain's Unión de Asociaciones de Artistas Visuales, England's Artist's Union, Australia's National Association for the Visual Arts, and Sweden's MU Agreement, among others, have proposed fee standards and organized themselves around defending the rights of artists. Institutional critique has become an art-historical category unto itself, and young artists are taking it upon themselves to develop their own individual strategies to receive compensation. The artist Cameron Rowland has established a rental contract for his work, so that the work remains his property while it is exhibited and included in museum collections. He has been successful in getting nonprofit organizations and museums to abide by his terms.

There are many artists on wage's board. Andrea Fraser, the board's president, directly addressed artist exploitation in a performance piece, in 2003, in which she sold herself to an art collector. On the phone from Los Angeles, Fraser emphasized that what separates wage from its predecessors is its focus on a fee-for-service model, in which simply choosing to participate in an arts organization's programming and exhibitions justifies compensation. "But," she clarified, "I don't really see wage as following a model of trade-union development. It seems to me closer to the model of a professional guild. Professional fields have developed standards and codes of ethics and other mechanisms to protect their legitimacy and to protect the public trust in professionals. It's on the basis of those internal standards and codes of ethics that professional fields won the right to self-regulate."

Fraser told me that she thinks wage's interests, while inspired by the A.W.C. and other initiatives, are specific to the twenty-first century. "When the Art Worker's Coalition was working, there were three or four museums in New York that they had to focus on." Since the late sixties and early seventies, she explained, **"that field has become a kind of industry. It has become a sector of society that has a huge economic base.** It has an extensive division of labor with many different levels of professionalization." Each of these, she pointed out, has standards of operation, including the American Association of Museum Directors' code of ethics and standards for compensation, museum rules for accessioning and deaccessioning, and standards adhered to by registrars, conservators, librarians, and archivists. Even curatorial work has been professionalized, with the proliferation of curatorial degree programs. "It exploded into a whole discourse and field of study," Fraser said. "And it's all based on the work of artists—on the contributions of artists providing content for these exhibitions. But," she laughed at the irony, "artists are the only ones who don't get paid in many cases."

Because artists tend to be concerned with their autonomy and wage will not be bargaining collectively, wagency's tactic is potentially a weak one, as it attempts to enact a boycott on an individual basis. Artists will have to overcome an ingrained opportunistic outlook and determine whether they should refuse to participate. Fraser insists, "Being compensated for one's work is not the same thing as reducing one's work and its value to economic value."

Fraser went the way of the teaching track Kenny spoke of, and he was her student at U.C.L.A. According to him, opportunities have dwindled since artists of Fraser's generation were coming onto the scene. As if echoing Fraser's remarks, he said, "The field of art has become a lot more professionalized," but he was speaking of it as a hindrance. He continued, "That involves the educational-industrial complex, so people feel like they need to get master's degrees, but there's so many people who have master's degrees that it doesn't guarantee that you'll be able to get a tenure-track position. Also, lots of educational institutions are shifting towards more precarious, adjunct labor, which was not the case twenty or thirty years ago."

Kenny has found that he has the sharpest conversations about the economic realities of art with people who come from other fields. "They might be d.j.s, they might be activists; they don't have the same baggage that artists have," he said. **"There's this notion that, if you're satisfied with your work, you don't need to be compensated. People say, 'If you find a job that you love, you'll never work a day in your life.' That's a total falsehood, and I think it's actually poisonous. I feel like survival should be the first thing; everybody should be compensated adequately for their work, whether they like what they're doing or not. How about that?"**

An earlier version of this post incorrectly described the arrangement behind the 2003 art project "Untitled.