

Art and knowledge, research and teaching are free.' Article 21, Berlin Constitution

I think this constitutional article is a good place to start because it highlights a lot of what is at stake in tonight's discussion. First, the double meaning of the term 'free', which, as we know from Marx's definition of 'double freedom' in *Capital*, attaches to the character of free labour. On the one hand, this refers to the freedom to sell your labour for the best price the market will bear without ties of non-economic obligation such as religion or tradition. The other half of double freedom is being free of ownership of the means of production. And this second half is the practical unfreedom that undermines the formal freedom posited in the first. In this article 21, we can read that art and knowledge, research and teaching should be free, and this probably signifies freedom as in 'free of political control'. But this can also be taken to imply that being free of restraint by political control can only effectively obtain in conditions of economic freedom, that is, when you don't have to pay for education, and it is considered a public good rather than a commodity. This is one implication. But things become a little – if not substantially – different when it comes to art, because the 'free' artist is, for all intents and purposes, working for free in return for *being* free. That is, the normative ideology of free creation and self-realization, self-determination – autonomy – is that which makes artistic work distinct from wage labour and serves to perpetuate it as an exception, both structurally and imaginatively. This exception then goes on to acquire a positive moral valence which is inextricable from the reference to 'autonomy' as freedom of the most profound – if often immaterial – kind. What is also specific about artistic production or the field of art rather (so as to include other kinds of cultural producers, professionals, and participants) is that the relationship between the structural, or the systemic, and the imaginary is more clear than usual in capitalism, at least when subjected to analysis.

My use of this quote has another motivation also which is to signal that the determination of the freedom of art is enshrined in legislation and is thus always a matter of government – or governance, to take the distinction between the concentrated and diffuse forms of state power discussed by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in their *Strategy of the Undercommons* book. Not only is the freedom of the artist a claim to a certain kind of power, it is also a question for power, it is something to be organised, administered and exploited. But organised and administered by whom, for whom, and to what end? Who is counted? This is, as I understand it, central to the discussion tonight since as Time Grants is a political campaign whose advocacy is in the space of policy or of influencing the policies of the local state, namely the Berlin senate.

However, 'double freedom' structures my presentation in general, inasmuch as it will be dedicated to exploring how this concept mutates in the field of art, or artistic labour – though 'artistic labour' is a problematic terminology in lots of ways – and how a labour politics in art has played out historically and in the present. My proposition is that attempts to compare what artists do with a sort of imaginary of 'generic waged labour', whether politically or in terms of compensation, the equation of artists with workers as a foregone conclusion – tends to founder on the ideology of artistic exceptionality, which is, artists do not want to think of themselves as workers because part of the reason people become artists is that they don't want to do so-called regular jobs. This is the utopian character to what is usually discussed as the conservative, hyper-individualism of artists, as well as the difficulties presented by measuring their output in money or time, creating the conditions we all know which are actually abjectly proletarian in the most usual sense: ruthless competition in a field where only a small elite have the practical or material autonomy whose ideological side remains generally available (Sholette's notion of 'dark matter'). At the same time, artistic exceptionality can be mobilized at a policy level to organize for better working conditions for artists while – perhaps

strategically – leaving aside the larger questions of how this change in policy relating to compensation for artists relates to wider political and economic conditions.

So first I will say a little bit about the organization where I am a board member and conversation partner, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy). WAGE started out as an activist campaign in 2008 with informal discussions, peer research and public events relating to the different facets of non-payment as the condition of artistic production, which is of course a crisis of reproduction, particularly for the artists who cannot fulfil the horizon of the speculative subject who succeeds in the art market, the horizon presupposed by the normative substitution of symbolic assets for economic ones. Since its founding, W.A.G.E. has advocated for a single achievable goal: the regulated payment of artist fees within the nonprofit sector, but it emerges from a long tradition of artists organizing around the issue of remuneration for cultural work in the U.S. that dates back to the 1930s. WAGE's scope was from the start fairly narrow, focusing on the inclusion of artist fees in the budgets of non-profit institutions at all scales, from project spaces to museums and biennales. It was also geographically specific, limited to the legal obligations for non-commercial institutions in the U.S., although a lot of research was done on other national models of compensation by institutions for artists, such as CARFAC in Canada. This research was by autumn 2010 formalized into a survey conducted with around 1000 visual and performing artists, which subsequently led to the setting up of the WAGE Certification program which is a voluntary certificate applied to institutions who allow WAGE - I should mention that in 2014 WAGE became a non-profit org by U.S. law, hence the establishment of a board a couple of years later - to audit their finances and demonstrate either an ongoing practice of paying artists fees or a proven commitment to begin paying them with the next round of funding – and this is fees is based on the WAGE calculator, a tool available on our website, [wageforwork.com](http://wageforwork.com), which calculates the minimum artist fee an org should be paying in proportion to its overall budget. The organizations that have so far received certification have annual operating budgets ranging in size from \$28,000 to over \$2,000,000. This is a pretty loose regulation, as WAGE is currently one core organizer, so there's very little it can do in terms of oversight or enforcement mechanisms. This limited capacity means the certification is more of an instrument that works within a reputation economy, and one could argue that the narrowness of the WAGE focus has also encouraged a more instrumental and reformist rather than politicizing or antagonistic approach, and I'll talk about this more later.

WAGE has knowingly tried to sidestep the kind of minefield I hinted at earlier with how the concept of double freedom plays out in the art field, something which Time Grants is doing too in another way, by not trying to define artists as workers or what artists do as work, which should be compensated or regarded as any other kinds of work – among other things, this would imply an indefensibly nostalgic and inaccurate understanding of so-called 'regular' employment, which is becoming or rather has become generally precarious and irregular. So the WAGE refusal of the speculator identity, the subject of self-investment, for the practice of art, or as the infrastructure of support for making art, is predicated on setting down certain standards which could eliminate the competitiveness caused by the power imbalances in the field between artists and funders. Let's just call artists anyone who applies for cultural funding – obviously a specialised definition in the specialised conversation we're having. So while WAGE's goals look pretty modest, this pragmatist focus can actually have more radical consequences, insasmuch as it tries to trigger concrete shifts in the circumstances of the reproduction of artists and thus give them the security to act politically not only for themselves but more broadly (GULF Labour Coalition, etc.) The precarious circumstances which obtain in the field tend to encourage critique to stay at the level of representation for artists and discourage any collective agency in addressing the conditions of the field. Of course, what is important is that this precarity is increasingly the norm for all kinds of work; its outsize rhetorical

importance in the field of art has everything to do with the mystification of precarity as freedom that continues to be almost totally hegemonic in the field, a hegemony that has everything to do with the class character of this field.

At the same time, by bringing in the prospect of standardisation of fees and conditions, WAGE strikes against the ideological exceptionality of artistic activity which not only makes it difficult for artists to see themselves as having any interests in common or to see a practical contradiction between these interests and the interests of institutions and funders, but makes it hard to practice wider solidarities at anything, again, but the level of representation. Thus, without being able to point to concrete examples since this is very much an early and developing aspect of WAGE's practice, I am interested in thinking about how very narrow, pragmatic agendas of improvement in artists' working conditions can be articulated with, or within, a larger radicalism or anti-capitalist politics. How to avoid both an inflationary assumption that artists are 'already' workers or already politically radical simply due to their ideological (rather than structural) position in capitalist society and thus should form a union and agitate for their rights as workers or another outcome of the same position: artists do work that has special value, which make them special subjects whose time is particularly precious and should be compensated accordingly from the tax proceeds of the state. Now this is not to say that artists should not organize as artists on the basis of their conditions – this is only to say that the class character of these conditions should be acknowledged, i.e. a freely chosen precarity rather than the 'double freedom' of those who have nothing to sell but their labour. Speculation and self-investment have largely become alibis for impoverishment in an era of unending and intensifying crisis rather than ideological skeletons we can safely defeat with sharp-enough arguments, as in the era of inflation of 'precariat'-style discourse. However, the fact of chosen rather than imposed precarity – with a ratio between these being of course the more factual description, a spectrum rather than a divide – is in fact the material basis of artistic exceptionality which can be radicalised in collective campaigns, because it already recognizes how it is connected to the states of exception rapidly being rolled out to non-artists, well as the non-artist character of many of the social and physical needs artists also need to fulfil – needs that a functional social-welfare system could perhaps unify better with the needs of artistic projects than an expanded system of grants distribution to artists.

At the same time, I think this is quite an ambiguous area and hard to make rigid distinctions in. I have always been critical of the 'we demand to get paid for making the world more interesting' line in the WAGE wo/manifesto – one of the earliest documents on the WAGE site – and it's a position WAGE would now distance itself from, but I am not persuaded that the *objectively* surplus-value adding character of artistic activity that phrase recognizes – which is also at the base of the campaigning undertaken by Haben und Brauchen and Time Grants – can simply be disavowed. It can be radicalising to insist on artistic labour being compensated in money rather than in reputation benefits, as WAGE does, or for more funding to be made available by the state, as Time Grants does, but this has to take a dialectical approach to the question of the exceptionality of the artist, rather than an attitude of affirmation or negation. This premise has in fact to be used against itself, in order to establish solidarity through the struggle for specific interests. The way I envision this dialectics is encapsulated well by Lise from WAGE when she writes recently: '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.'

We could argue that artists are of course also taxpayers, users of social services, activists – their

interests and their politics as artists should be contested alongside these other interests. True. But to the extent that artistic practice and artistic institutions are supposed to be autonomous in the bad and simplistic way of 'above politics' (rather than in the materialist way Adorno discussed, i.e. fully embedded in and resisting heteronomy that affects everyone), than any affinity between the interests of artists and other workers should be emphasised – breaking exceptionality. However, artists are not workers in the same way, formally or experientially – they have chosen their precarity. Art scene concentration does produce material benefits for states and investors in a place like Berlin. So, from that point of view, artists are exceptional. But none of it would work in Berlin without the transport infrastructure, low-paid migrant labour, etc. So, these people too are exceptional. Aren't they? In passing, we could look at a project like the New York City Real Estate Investment Cooperative as an instance of an artist-led, policy-based initiative which tries to harness the speculative property market for its own ends (though it seems to abide by a largely donation-based rather than mobilizing model, a critique which could also be made of WAGE). Meanwhile, projects like the Market for Immaterial Value or Robin Hood Asset Management likewise try to leverage the infrastructure of finance for either gestural or socially 'useful' (or both) ends, at the very least de-mystifying finance in the same way as I have been arguing labour politics in the field of art de-mystify the identity of the artists and the ontology of art, whatever else they may or may not accomplish. On the other hand, a project like unMonastery, initiated by artist, curator and technologist Ben Vickers, is almost completely affirmative of the crisis subjectivity of the speculator and without going into the detail I have developed this argument in elsewhere, I would say this is a kind of embrace of artistic (and engineering) exceptionality which is at the very least ineffectual and at the outside actively damaging to any social justice project which depends on a drastic transformation in legal and property relations as well as subjectivity.

Following all this thinking aloud, I will conclude by saying that my research around the value relations of artistic production has left me with an understanding of the non-identity of artistic labour and labour in general, of value accumulation and the more phantasmatic forms of value circulating in the space of art. However, this only underlines that capital operates through the exception, with consolidated class interest of owners, or even impersonal financialised systems, facing a population of disorganized, diffuse and highly atomised exceptional individuals. This is even more so when wanting to be paid starts to itself become exceptional, a convention shrinking to the very lowest and very highest echelons of the labour market, whereas the norm is increasingly debt, speculation on your human capital and managing that of others (self-and other exploitation) and entrepreneurial-slash-sacrificial working for free forever. This is the current model of crisis accumulation, and as the feminist activist and theorist Selma James said a long time ago, in the context of Wages for Housework 'Wages for anyone is bad for business'. So by all means, artists organizing for more funding and better working conditions is part of the struggle against absolute impoverishment and brutal competition in effect today. Anyone who says it isn't or can't be is being silly. However, you have to know your battle and your enemy, and unless there is an element of self-negation (the dialectic of exceptionality I spoke of) and solidarity in the political and philosophical agenda of the project from the beginning, a wider politics, however reduced to pragmatic immediate policy demands it may have to be, it will only create more fragile enclaves in the ever-deepening sea of misery. Thanks.

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