

<H>ART is a young and fast-growing Belgian print magazine for contemporary art. It wants to keep up with the contemporary expressive art scene in an alert and accessible way. Now in its third year, <H>ART starts working more internationally. That's why we offer a <H>ART International section, with contributions in English or French. Therefore we selected some good international writers and/or critics, who use their expertise to report about the contemporary expressive art in their region or country. It wouldn't be only the reviewing of a certain artist or exhibition (although it is allowed when it is particularly interesting), but the critical pointing to new artistic trends and evolutions in the art scene the critic likes, linked to social, political and economical context.

On the other hand, Belgian photographer Jean-Pierre Stoop pictures the most relevant and interesting contemporary art events of the Belgian contemporary art scene.

## Working Artists and the Greater Economy

# W.A.G.E. FOR WORK

**Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) is an activist collective formed in 2008. Artists K8 Hardy, A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner have been organizing monthly meetings at New York City's Judson Church, mobilizing people to fight for their cause. An interview.**

**W.A.G.E.:** "We're a group of artists, performers, and independent curators who believe that we should be paid for our labor by U.S. art institutions."

*Would you say that U.S. art institutions traditionally don't pay for that kind of labor? Why is it necessary that they do?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "Who else would be asked this question? Art institutions do pay for labor, but not artist's labor. Art labor has eternally been an inconsistent, secretive, opaque, mysterious part of the economy, whether it is based on patronage, collecting or commission. Hans Abbing, a Dutch economist and artist, labels it an 'exceptional' economy in his book 'Why Are Artists Poor?' It's not a black market economy because the participants are somewhat regulated in their dealings, and run public and private institutions. What we're dealing with in the U.S. is more than 100,000 non-profit art institutions which have been making the rules up by themselves with no oversight; they have deleted the artist from their budget structures. This is unacceptable because the economic rules of capitalism are conveniently deleted only for the cultural workers in this structure."

*What are W.A.G.E.'s demands exactly?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "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, proactively preventing the art worker's ability to survive within the greater economy. We demand payment for making the world more interesting."

*In which way would you like to achieve these demands? Are you cooperating with any major art organizations or partners?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "We're an activist and consciousness-raising group. In the very least, institutions need to establish base fees for all arts workers. There are many, many options. We're not talking about artist fees that break the bank. We're demanding that a reasonable system of compensation and mutual respect be firmly implemented in U.S. art institutions as a matter of policy. That effort corresponds logically and fairly with the economic system we're participating in, and it would be best if these institutions took it upon themselves and were not forced to complete this task. We're holding discussions and conversations, with both people here, nationally, and internationally, who are working on the same issues – artists, performers, curators, institutional staff members, academics – devising strategies in order to effect change. We're in the process of organizing a strategy wherein institutions can become W.A.G.E.-certified."

*Which sources of income do U.S. artists have? How do they earn their money?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "Most artists, performers and independent curators have secondary and tertiary 'day jobs' as assistants, writers, graphic artists, teachers, construction workers, waiters, art handlers, bartenders, non-profit administrators, carpenters, massage therapists, stylists, designers, editors, etc. etc. Many float from one odd job to the next. It's quite challenging to carry a consistent full-time or part-time job,

as the demands of being an artist often requires the ability to not work at all for a week, or two, or three, or more at a time, while having made enough money to 'float'. Many artists 'binge' work, both for their art and their day-job. Even 'successful' artists are constantly hustling. There's a tiny, finite number of artists who can actually live solely off the sale of their artwork. Cultural institutions offer to pay us in 'exposure', and that's a farce: unfortunately, our landlords do not accept that as a payment. Hollis Frampton addressed this in a letter he composed to MoMA in 1973 when the museum offered to "pay him in 'love and honor'". He outlined the workers in all of the industries he supports by making his work: the film and camera manufacturers, processing labs, lens grinders, print labs, etc, as well as the entire museum staff. As noted in his letter, he was the only one not being paid for his work. This was 35 years ago, and overall, the terms have largely remained unchanged, except for the cost of living."

*Have you based your practice on a historical precedent? Did people fight for similar causes before?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "Yes, of course: the Artists' Union and the Paris Commune's Federation des Artistes in the 1930's, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change and the Art Worker's Coalition in the 70's, The Guerilla Girls in the 80's, and so on. As the market has grown larger and more commercial – estimated as a 30-50 billion dollar industry – and the pool of artists has grown as well, there must be a conscious change implemented. Institutions should serve as our advocates rather than our adversaries in maintaining a robust arts community instead of focusing solely on the trading of our objects among the super-rich. Our local museums are non-profit institutions due to their 'educational' status and they must bear the inherent responsibility of contributing to the income of the cultural workers from whom they request services. We're being used and, in most cases, denied compensation for our participation."

*There is a major financial crisis happening in the U.S., which has severe repercussions for art organizations. I know of people working as staff for non-profits who are temporarily not getting paid for their labor. Other major organizations are on the brink*

*of closing their doors. Do you think this is a good time to fight for economic inequalities? Doesn't the art world have other problems to deal with?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "There's also a major ecological crisis, so why print your magazine on precious resources? You probably think, "Because it's important." Well, these issues are paramount. Yes, the art market bottom has dropped-out, so the stakes are high for economic survival within our communities. Like all other sectors of society, not every institution will survive the economic shrinkage nor will every person involved in cultural work have a job. When there's a smaller market, the issues we raise become more apparent. Art will continue to be exhibited; so systemic policies and priorities must change to support artists economically. The institutions we work with and for are dependent on us for their livelihood. Your question assumes that things can't be changed, improved or fixed because it's too scary, or impossible, or unreasonable. We're placed in the position of accepting that there must be a no-fee system because otherwise the system won't work. We absolutely don't believe this is true, and it follows the model of other market-economy lies currently haunting the American worker: Wages vs. profits. There's definitely a current hysteria, both in perception and reaction, to shifts in the economy and employment markets. We can look to other countries' institutional models to know that W.A.G.E.'s demands aren't some crazy, untenable dream. They're based on the solid fact that cultural workers in other countries get paid by institutions that request their service. If there were artists fee allocations, systemic policies and oversight, or merely any degree of budgetary transparency in the U.S., W.A.G.E. would be obsolete. So we can no longer afford to abide by 'feelings' on these matters, it's more about where priorities lay. Artists, performers and independent curators are not a 'charity', nor are we alien creatures who survive on air and live in a dreamstate; we're part of the workforce, and at the same time, create our own networks and gift economies. But, institutionally, in both good and bad economic times, things have stayed the same."

*Of course, I entirely agree. What kinds of reactions do you get, are people in*

*general supportive?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "People have responded with a huge amount of relief, surprise and support to hear a voice that acknowledges or describes their specific situation. And, most of the institutional staff members or former staffers, curators and gallerists we've heard from have given us really useful and valuable input on these matters."

*Are you looking for partners abroad who fight for similar causes? Non-payment of artists is not exclusively a U.S. problem. Don't you think the struggle will be more effective as a joint international endeavor?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "Because of the generous support of e-flux with our announcements, we've been in contact with many national and international organizations that are working on similar issues, such as the The Present Group in the Bay Area, Scottish Artists Union, c-e-a in Paris, FOCS in Sweden, and many others."

*Do you think artists are treated differently in other parts of the world?*

**W.A.G.E.:** "Yes and no, every place is different. But the prevailing late capitalist economic philosophies in the U.S. have unfortunately spread to the very institutions that comprise our community. Since the 1980's, Senator Jesse Helms and other right-wing politicians have used sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia to target American artists in a 'culture war'. U.S. art institutions have willfully gone along with this game, relieving themselves from the responsibility of directly supporting artists financially. It has forced us to become solely market speculators rather than cultural workers who enrich our communities. Humans are innovative, imaginative, organized and intellectual, we've accomplished all kinds of miraculous things over the past couple millennia. Paying artist fees is not some impossible task. To assume that art institutions can't allocate part of their budgets for fees is, at best, naive and, at worst, criminal."

<http://www.wageforwork.com/>

Niels VAN TOMME

is curator and researcher living in New York City. He is the Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Library. He is currently curating 'Close Encounters 2', a show about the art of social imagination, at the Nathan Cummings Foundation.



## Raoul De Keyser, artist in residence in MFA Ghent

Last year, Raoul De Keyser (°1930) donated a series of 187 works on paper from the period 1964-1979 to the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent. These drawings show how Raoul De Keyser evolved from figurative works made under the influence of his teacher Roger Raveel to the abstract compositions he is internationally known for. These drawings were made on a series of different papers and in various media such as pencil, ink, water-colour and acrylic. The exhibition includes important studies from the years 1974 to 1978, in which De Keyser explored the possibilities of drawing motifs from nature. The entire donation is exhibited in the museum and published in an illustrated catalogue. A series of paintings by Raoul De Keyser, dating from the same period as the drawings, is also shown.

Until September 20 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Citadelpark, 9000 Ghent. Open Tue-Sun from 10h to 18h. [www.mskgent.be](http://www.mskgent.be)

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