

# You and Your Crits

## **LISE SOSKOLNE**

Lise Soskolne is an artist living in New York and core organizer of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), an activist organization focused on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions. An organizer within W.A.G.E. since its founding in 2008 and its core organizer since 2012, she has also worked in nonprofit arts presenting and development in New York since 1998 at venues that have included Anthology Film Archives, Artists Space, Diapason Gallery for Sound, Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts, Participant Inc., and Roulette Intermedium. In 2007 she was hired to use

artists to increase the property value of Industry City, a 650,000 square metre industrial complex on the South Brooklyn waterfront. There she founded and managed the arts component in its broader regeneration with the intention of establishing a new paradigm for industrial redevelopment that would not displace workers, artists, local residents or industry but would instead build a sustainable community of working artists in a context that integrated cultural and industrial production.



*Student revolt in the painting department at Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Vancouver 1993. Image by Lise Soskolne.*

*A text by Lise Soskolne, written for and read at "Painting-Politics", a panel discussion at New York University on March 7, 2014.*

What follows is some biographical self-analysis in short form. Extending back to the mid-1990s, it reads as a symptomatic account of someone—a woman—navigating the politics of painting. By this I also mean the politics of the art world, and by the politics of the art world I also mean its economy, and by its economy I mean the creation of value.

*An excerpted speech by Lise Soskolne for W.A.G.E., delivered at the Museum fur Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany on March 1, 2013 at the invitation of artist Andrea Büttner as part of her exhibition.*

W.A.G.E. stands for Working Artists and the Greater Economy.<sup>4</sup> We're a group of visual and performance artists and independent curators fighting for the regulated payment of artist fees by the non-profit art institutions who contract our labor.

**T**HE INVITATION TO SPEAK about painting and politics came because I have a bifurcated practice. Like others, I make paintings and I do things that are classified as political: But in my case one is visible and the other is not. What you can see are the politics, which make themselves apparent now through W.A.G.E.<sup>2</sup> and before that through Industry City<sup>3</sup> and, if you have known me, through working in art institutions.

What you don't see are the paintings, because I don't exhibit my work — I am not an *exhibiting artist*. I don't participate as someone who paints or through the things that I make in my studio. Or it's that I choose not to do what's necessary to operate as an exhibiting artist and so I don't participate that way.

And while I absolutely do not consider W.A.G.E. to be my art or anyone else's, the currency of institutional critique and social practice make it possible for me to participate as an artist through W.A.G.E.

I make presentations and I meet and correspond with directors and curators about the economy of art, which is what many institutions are at the moment looking to incorporate into and address through their programming. This happens with such efficacy and productive friction so as to render painting and the practice of painting a source of shame for its uselessness in that process and in the economy of critical art-making in general.

So let us be clear: painting may still command the highest prices at auction and in commercial sales markets, but it has for many decades now commanded very little in the way of critical or political import, and this is especially true today. Painting may not be capable

**T**HIS IS A SOMEWHAT strange situation because the artist Andrea Büttner and Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art have generously invited W.A.G.E. to share in this very special meal inside of this important museum to talk about poverty and economic inequity in the art world.

W.A.G.E. is an activist group that addresses the role that non-profit art institutions play in preventing the artist's ability to survive within the greater economy by not paying us for our labor. So, W.A.G.E. may just indirectly bite the hand that is feeding us tonight.

And in this context there might appear to be some contradiction in our claiming impoverishment in the face of so much affluence, especially when we participate in the creation of wealth, and we benefit from it too.

How can we complain? Artists have the privilege of getting to do what we want, when we want, and how we want. And sometimes we get to present our work in great cultural institutions like this, in a space like this, and like this exhibition which has been mounted with such care and sensitivity that it affirms that what we make together—as artist and institution—has little to do with the creation of wealth.

So it seems kind of inappropriate in such a place and at such a moment and in such company, to talk about the fact that it has everything to do with the creation of wealth, and that this wealth is unequally distributed. And that most of the time artists don't receive any form of compensation for their work, and that most of us, while being culturally affluent, live in relative material poverty.

So it's exactly because this is the wrong moment and the wrong place

1. This text is revision of a lecture presented at the "Painting-Politics" panel discussion held at New York University, 2014-03-07.

2. Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) is a New York-based activist organization focused on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions and establishing a sustainable labor relation between artists and the institutions that subcontract their labor. See URL: <http://www.wageforwork.com>.

3. Sunset Park's Industry City is 35 acre industrial complex on the South Brooklyn waterfront that was the context in which the Artist Studio Affordability Project (ASAP) was formed in 2013 by a group of artists forced out of their studios due to rising. See URL: <http://www.artiststudioaffordabilityproject.org/efforts/>

4. This parallel text is a speech for W.A.G.E. edited for publication. The speech was delivered at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany on March 1, 2013 at the invitation of artist Andrea Büttner as part of her exhibition.

These two partner texts run in parallel columns throughout this contribution

of addressing the urgency of the colossal reordering of the world under neoliberal capitalism, but to write painting off as the embodiment of wealth or to posit it as the single-handed stoker of the market is irresponsible. It's a convenient characterization made by champions of so-called politically engaged practices in order to obfuscate that they too participate in value creation. Knowledge production has currency, and painting is at best a sidebar discourse.

Anyway, I still go to my studio and paint. I still make paintings in excess, as excess, in storage, in private, with investment, and without expectation of a return on it as such. It isn't networked and it doesn't circulate and it therefore doesn't exit contemporary art or leave the art world. And because it comes into being via the shame of making something irrelevant and without an audience it can reasonably be asked: *why don't you just make W.A.G.E. your art?*

And so, in response to my friend and colleague, a male curator, who asked me that question, I'm going to briefly try and explain why not and how my politics came to find themselves via the shame of painting's failure, and the gendered nature of that shame.

The biography part of this begins in the place that most artists' engagement with the politics of community begins: in art school. For me this was in Vancouver in the early 1990s. Emily Carr College of Art & Design, a low rent education with no formal instruction and no required critical reading beyond *Art in Theory 1900 - 1990*. This meant that we learned by implication. Painting was dead – this was explicit, and, by implication, if made by women, was borderline unethical, indicted somewhere between the crisis of representation and identity politics, and then skewered by post-structuralism and appropriation.

Not explicit but unmistakably clear was that if you wanted to plug yourself into a conduit of any influence in Vancouver, if you wanted to participate in a discourse that wasn't regional, being an exhibiting artist there meant making things that photo conceptualists Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, Stan

to address it, that W.A.G.E. has been invited to speak here. And if I chose not to speak about inequity with candor tonight out of deference to the museum and the opportunity it has afforded me in being here, I'd be enacting the very relation that W.A.G.E. is working to overturn.

Demanding payment for services rendered and content provided is not an act of disrespect and there should be no shame in it. To bite the hand that feeds us because it's not feeding us what we deserve and need in order to live, and because it feeds us at its own arbitrary discretion, is really just to break with a relationship that is inequitable.

W.A.G.E. is focused on regulating the payment of artist fees because they are the most basic transaction in the economy of art. A fee is a rudimentary, crude and confused form of remuneration that bears no resemblance to the value of cultural labor today.

Artistic labor supports a multi-billion dollar industry and yet there are no standards, conventions or regulations for artist compensation. We sometimes receive artist fees if we ask for them, or they're dispensed at the discretion of the institution. As compensation for the work that we're asked to provide: preparation, installation, presentation, consultation, exhibition and reproduction, that sounds a lot like charity to us. And charity is a transaction.

But W.A.G.E. believes that charity is an inappropriate transaction within a robust art economy from which most get paid for their labor and others profit greatly, and we believe that the exposure we get from an exhibition does not constitute payment. We provide a work force. We refute the positioning of the artist as a speculator and call for the remuneration of cultural value in capital value.

We expect this from non-profits precisely because they are non-profit. They are granted special status because they serve the public good. This also means they're not subject to the laws of supply and demand for their survival. Instead they receive subsidies—charity, in fact—to do their work. A non-profit is by definition a public charity.

Douglas, or Rodney Graham would like. To that end, justifying not even painting's relevance, but painting's existence, period, was the starting point. And so began many years of thinking painting through the image grammar of contemporary media such as film, advertising, graphic illustration etc., and avoiding paint brushes, drawing, or anything that would indicate the presence of a subjectivity.

I had two solo exhibitions after undergrad and then moved to New York in 1998 and had two more. They were neither successful nor unsuccessful; they were a beginning. But there seemed to be something hollow in their execution — I was making exhibitions, not paintings.

Had I been able to do this with the kind of irony that was in ascension in the early 2000s this might have been a comfortable and even profitable position for me. But I couldn't, and instead I decided to withdraw from trying to have exhibitions and then inadvertently worked in isolation for five years between 2001 and 2006.

The through line during this period is the attempt to construct a subjectivity, one informed by a sense that such a constitution isn't really possible and is therefore always in jeopardy and perpetually failing. This takes place in the context of an artist community and a city changing radically in composition and character under the unprecedented dominance of commerce gaining deep traction after 9/11.

At the same pace I became increasingly disaffected and disenchanted, and instead of re-entering as an artist I found myself participating by critically engaging with the art institutions and people I worked for — a kind of embodied institutional critique that resulted in being fired three times.

Privately, in the studio, I was unable to make painting participate, to make it relevant, or to articulate an authentic subjectivity, despite the fact that I didn't even believe in such a thing, and my non-participation had become more of a form of resistance. My paintings were somehow getting dumber and more flippant, while my politics were getting riskier and more tactical. I think this was when the shame of painting transmuted itself into a politics.

A public charity also has a special moral status because it seems to operate outside of the commercial marketplace; it isn't subject to what profit demands from the rest of us. It doesn't have to compromise its ethics for the sake of capital.

Paradoxically though, it is this very moral authority that imbues artworks and artists with economic value in the commercial marketplace. The logic is that if it's exhibited in an institution, it must have value beyond commerce and it is exactly this perception that adds value to art when it reaches the commercial auction and sales markets.

Moral authority also enables the non-profit to raise money. The money that non-profits receive from the state, private foundations and corporate sponsors is given to them with the contractual obligation that they will use it to present public exhibitions and programs. That's what the money is given to them for. The non-profit is a public charity but it is not a charity provider and artists are not a charity case because we earn our compensation—just like the director, the curator, and the graphic designer.

A non-profit art institution is an economic anomaly in the free market because it maintains an unusual position in relation to profit and the role profit plays in determining wages. If it's true that wages are often kept low in order to maximize profit, then there is a real opportunity here—since profit is not the goal—to set wages in terms of their real value, and in direct relation to the cost of living.

Artists: you also bear some responsibility in this equation. Don't tell yourself you're lucky to be having an exhibition. You were subcontracted to produce content for an institution that receives charity for exactly that purpose. Exhibiting your work at an institution is a transaction. Even if €50,000 are being spent to produce your artwork, that €50,000 has been budgeted for and an artist fee should also be budgeted for separate from production costs so that you can pay your bills—just like the salary of the person who wrote the budget, the salary of the person who did the fundraising,

I would say now that the paintings and choices I made that led to this transmutation were unconsciously gendered. Internalizing failure is typically an assignment for women and in this case, my willful failure to participate as an exhibiting artist on the terms required of me — my perceived failure *to be* or *to be like* the male artists I learned through and appealed to through my work, occurred without a feminist consciousness.

Without an understanding at the time of this most basic mechanism, my perceived lack of success at making painting perform as a political actor and to place this agency in the public view of my peers did not seem to have anything to do with painting's inherent limitations, or how those limitations are further conditioned by gender.

Instead, what seemed like my own failure, what I can only describe as the private simple kind of shame that has no audience — perhaps the kind of fully internalized shame particular to women — became a fault line and then an active schism between two distinct practices: painting and politics. The shame of painting's failure turned in on itself, but it recapitulated as a motivation to act, launching directly out and back into the problem with the force of its repression.

So, the question: *Why don't I just make W.A.G.E. my art?*

As someone who now has the beginnings of a feminist consciousness, I can say that this question implies several things. It implies that efficacy equals success and that participation means having a public career. It implies that I should desire to have a public career and do so on the terms established by those who had and still have the power to determine whether I have a career or not; and that I must want what they have. And finally, therefore, this question implies that nothing much has changed since Vancouver in the mid-1990s.

and even the person who donated the funds—they got a tax break. None of this is luck, it's a system.

Institution: W.A.G.E. doesn't accept your claim of being a charity when you fundraise and a capitalist when you design your budgets. W.A.G.E. challenges you to use your moral authority and special economic status to set new standards for the compensation of labor.

Institution: have we bitten your hand? Have we shamed you into understanding why we can no longer accept being written out of the economic equation? If so, maybe this was in fact the right place and the right moment to have done so.