

**SPEECH BY A.K. BURNS GIVEN BY FOUNDING MEMBERS OF W.A.G.E. ON
SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2008 AT CREATIVE TIMES, DEMOCRACY NOW:**

It seems apt that W.A.G.E. is here tonight, to bring to light ongoing unjust fiscal practices in the art world, as we witness the unfolding saga of wall street and what results from unregulated economic greed.

We see it does no one any good, not even those who initially benefited from exploitative endeavors.

For the artists here tonight I imagine few or none of you make a living solely by selling your art? Even most 'successful' artist teach, or supplement their income in some fashion.

And How many of you have exhibited work with institutions or museums in the US, in which all costs incurred were covered by the institution?

I'm talking about, travel expenses (if any) AND all exhibition/ installation costs covered, AND received an artists fee, (for the hours you spent consulting with the institution, preparing works for exhibition,) AND a lecture fee (if you lectured) AND a reproduction fee for the use of your image in advertising materials.

Does this list sound absurd?

What is absurd is to exclude artist from the payment of their labor, the reproduction and exhibition of their work, with in an economic climate where it is socially acknowledged that payment is granted for services rendered.

It's NOT absurd, because there are many examples of artists fees being covered in their ENTIRETY, in many other countries.

Possibly your thinking, "well they must be socialist, and they have more government funding than our private institutions do."

Those things may be true, and it may explain why they have adopted a more humane relationship towards artists, than what we experience here. But it's not an excuse for NOT CHANGING things here.

If capitalism is your bag, and priority, I can't think of anything more capitalist than getting paid for your labor, for your copyrights... for institutions to aid our ongoing contribution to the economy, with all the money we spend to maintain an art practice.

let there be TRANSPARENCY! do not be deceived by the ever present "we don't have money" excuse. The United States is home to many of the wealthiest institutions in the world.

US institutions simply, flat out, REFUSE to put artists fees in their annual budgets.

And WHY do they refuse?

Because they can.

as artists, we are, apparently a masochistic bunch! We let them get away with it. Apparently, we MUST suffer for our art. I think there are plenty of other things in the world to suffer over besides a legitimate desire to be paid for your labors. As artists, we have made an unspoken collective agreement to work in exchange for the ever elusive sugar daddy known as 'EXPOSURE'.

TODAY WE MAKE A PUBLIC and COLLECTIVE STATEMENT, that we can not and will not live off EXPOSURE in exchange for our labors.

For those of us involved at what ever level with the art world, we have watched massive economic expansion over the past decade. The art market is no longer an exclusive and intimate number of uber wealthy collectors. It's international. It's an expansive web of artist, curators, writers, critics, collectors, art schools, galleries, biennials, art fairs, non-profit art spaces, museums and institutions.

But I'd like to speak locally for a moment. given that NYC is one of, if not THE cultural capital of the world. I feel that making a change here will inevitably effect the larger picture. In NY the production of art is essential to the economy as a whole, but also to the heart and soul of this city.

What is NYC without the cultural history that artists have brought to it? Why is it that all of us live here, where drawn to move here? and why do we love it so, EVEN as it become an increasingly frustrating place to try and survive. It is because of the massive proliferation of culture that occurs here. NYC without artists begins to look allot like a grim overpriced shopping mall.

And we will argue here tonight that the well being and ability of artist to survive in this great city is in CRISIS.

I'd like to quote an article I read recently, that was an interview with Susan and Micheal HORT, whom many of you 'in the know', know they are avid and respected collectors of contemporary art here in NY claim:

Their comments on why they currently collect very little art from NY and prefer to look elsewhere, like LA and Europe. And they go on to discuss the complexity of the COST of being an artist. And that even for those whom selling in a gallery is viable option, it doesn't always mean it's the best choice one can make.

“we don't find the art, the artists in New York; they are in Europe right now... it's very difficult for a young artist to make a living in New York and do a good job. If you graduate from art school, have a studio and an apartment in NY, you have to have a full time job, in which case you can't do your ART. Or you HAVE to sell in a gallery – in which case you're selling your soul. And your art will never change, because you know if you make your black paintings that you dream of making, and they don't sell, you're dead. Art is... if you make money, okay. But it really should be about creating something that's important to civilization, that moves people.“
end quote..

it's one thing when artists complain, but you know there is a SERIOUS problem when even the collectors are bitching about economically debilitating circumstances.

And Why do you think people are flocking to get MFA's? Because it's one of the few options to get a loan to give you TIME to develop your work. Artists NOW, don't need an MFA any more than artist did 20 years ago. what artists NEED now, that is harder and harder to come by, is time, VALUABLE TIME.

Unfortunately, it seems that many of those with power, those who operate the larger cultural institutions seem to be ignoring to this fact.. the fact is that artists do not GET PAID to go to there studios. That selling art is a possibility but NOT a promise. And that we should not feel required to sell, for mere survival. especially when we are laboring in so many other ways. Our labor is more than just the sum of our 'collectable product'. We ALSO should not feel our career is dependant on the act of giving and donating, our TIME our MONEY our WORK. AND in particular for institutions who ask the PUBLIC to PAY to see our work!

WE ARE NOT FIGHTING TO BE RICH, WE ARE FIGHTING TO SURVIVE.

So, there is this ART Market, that is seemingly thriving, and expanding quicker than you can say “art fair”. But where is the money? In the secondary market? In enormously endowed institutions?

It's in many places that thrive off our 'product' but give NOTHING in return.

What we ask for is really quite simple, it's very reasonable. we may not be able to quit our jobs and joyfully produce art 24/7 as we all dream of, but we'll feel less ABUSED by the system that profits from and celebrates our production and existence.

Lets look at an inspiring example, that exist only hours from here, via our Canadian neighbors. In 1968, CARFAC was created, and has successfully represented the rights of artists and established a universal fee system, based on the size of an institution and the various aspects of exhibition labor that an artist contributes.

To quote CARFAC's statement of purpose:

"We believe that artists, like professionals in other fields, should be paid for their work and share equitably in profits from their work."

the first CARFAC fee schedule was met with great disbelief and hostility. some galleries supported artists' rights and began paying fees but there were many who refused. As we all know, change never comes easy. OBAMA!

As a result CARFAC announced that its members would boycott all non-fee paying institution. And guess what happened... more began paying fees.

People we exist in and play willing into an exploitive system, that other people recognized and began changing 40 years ago. we can all just sit and bitch about it, but I say, I can't SURVIVE any longer, YOU can't survive any longer, by being complaisant. We are here today to begin to gather momentum, to gather you, to create collective agency, to provide us with what we NEED and DESERVE.

W.A.G.E. ON!

Thank you.

A.K. BURNS, 2008
