(UN)DOING (UN)COMPENSATION

Caroline Woolard

In March, 2014, Open Engagement asked: ***How many uncompensated people labor on the piece?*** What follows is an attempt to reframe the question, and the debate, around (un)compensation.

Within a neoliberal economy that supports the debt-backed-professionalization of artists and activists, I question the relationship between overproduction and underpayment. What are the conditions that make overproduction desirable? When did monetary payment for art and activism become necessary? While artists and activists demand payment for work, we must also articulate our relationship to payment systems: market sales, state-support, philanthropy, and solidarity economies that center on livelihood. Acknowledging the diverse economies that I circulate in, I hope this writing points towards the internal contradictions that make professionalized, debtor artists and activists in the United States (including me) hussle for cash while engaging in projects on scales that cannot possibly compensate all participants equitably.

As most people reading this already know, the labor behind many works of art is veiled by a myth of individual genius. Although contemporary artworks that circulate in museums, galleries, and biennials are mostly produced by unpaid interns, underpaid artists' assistants, seasonally-employed shop technicians, and far-flung contractors hired by artists' project managers, narratives that celebrate individual charisma and "the artist's touch" continue to permeate wall labels and art discourse alike.

Many artist-collectives, by sharing labor and decision making power, counteract the alienation that often occurs with an hourly wage and a drive towards efficiency in rapid production. To make labor visible, for *Artists Experiment* at MoMA in 2013, I proposed an ongoing event where artists, interns, assistants, and craftspeople would stand beside the works of art that they labored on, telling visitors about the process of producing each work, as well as the forms of compensation received by each person. This proposal, submitted as one of six options for *Artists Experiment* project at MoMA, was not chosen.

LIVELIHOOD OVER WAGES

While I believe that the labor involved in the production of any work of art is integral to the meaning of the piece, the question ("How many uncompensated people labor on the piece?") assumes that monetary compensation is the only form of compensation that artists aspire towards and value. We know that many people labor on every piece, but what is (un)compensation? What conditions make monetary compensation necessary or desirable for artists, and how might we understand, destabilize, and change these conditions?

If we, as artists and activists, knew that our needs for survival and beyond would be met by the government *or* our communities, would we labor differently? Proponents of a "guaranteed basic income," provided by the government, hope that socially necessary tasks like childcare and domestic work might be understood as valuable. If all people had a basic income, would we (artists) still sell our labor? If the United States were a country where all people were supported with a basic income, or, if I lived in an intentional community where we pooled money and shared domestic labor (like the seventy-five person strong community called Ganas in Staten Island), I know I would still aspire to refine my craft, create beauty, build community, take risks, speak truth, tell forgotten histories, learn about the desires and needs of my neighbors, and receive recognition for this labor.

SHORT TERM PRACTICES

So, while I struggle to create and support spaces where childcare, food, learning, and organizing are possible without dollar-per-hour payment, compensation as the only form of value, and where livelihood is honored over paid work, I attempt to educate myself about the conditions I work within while redistributing money and labor in some group projects I work on. If we acknowledge that hundreds of people labor for every project, what forms of compensation can we accept, and when? Here are seven ways in which I attempt to navigate inequity within institutions and collective projects:

1. The Institution vs. Me
Before I agree to a project, I go to http://www.guidestar.org/ to discover the salaries of the organizational directors, curators, and staff I am working with. For example, I see that the director of the Queens Museum, Tom Finkelpearl, was paid $143,288 in 2012, and the director of the Museum of Modern Art, Glenn D. Lowry, was paid $710,691 with a bonus of $338,215 in 2012. Further, I go to http://littlesis.org/ to see how board members of the organization affiliate politically. This often gives me insights into the internal power dynamics at play in the organization, as well as the kinds of request for payment that might be possible. For example, The Swedish Artists' National Organization asks that "for every exhibition in a public art institution an exhibition fee shall be paid. The artist shall be temporarily hired as staff and receive at least two months' salary at 25.000kr (US $3,743). The employer shall pay employers' fees and taxes.… The salary is not negotiable downwards." See Alison Gerber' "Payment for Services: From Market to Professional Logics of Valuation in Contemporary Artmaking" for more on W.A.G.E. and other groups doing good work on institutional payment requirements.

2. Diverse Economies Wall Labels
When OurGoods.org participated in Living as Form, we documented the labor and forms of payment that circulated in the production of our project, hanging this wall text beside the didactic wall text that Creative Time produced about our project. For *Exchange Cafe* at MoMA, I am producing a video and publication that reflects upon the 100 people who labored on the work. For example, after a long negotiation, MoMA's Education Department agreed to hire formerly incarcerated people as educators for *Exchange Cafe*, and to hire a worker cooperative run by formerly incarcerated people for catering. This contract continues today.

3. Cash for Projects, not Airfare
When a gallery in Tel Aviv asked Trade School New York to participate in a show there, raising $2,000 for airfare and lodging, we asked them to save carbon and celebrity, taking the money for our existing work and doing a remote lecture instead of travelling. This allowed us to avoid the drama of individual representation and representation over local work, to turn the institution's interest in our work towards project funding. Kate Rich has made a decade-long project by redirecting airfare and hotel funds towards her work on the Feral Trade Network.

4. Background Check
In some groups I'm in, we have open discussions about what we each need in order to continue working on any project. This takes a long time, and can only happen if building trust and open communication are possible. In some groups, members will need cultural capital in order to stay in the country, or press visibility in order to get a visa. In other groups, members will need to get paid in order to make time to participate in the project, while others will be able to volunteer because they need to make less money to survive. I aim to make transparent my class background (and race, age, sexual orientation, and ability) so that I can acknowledge spaces that are familiar and comfortable to me, as well as the "cushions" I work from. For more information about class and privilege, start here (and for people with wealth, read Classified).

5. Percentage of Payment
After thinking through the backgrounds and interests of members in a group, I often follow the worker cooperative model: equal member participation, and distribution based on percentage of work. After supporting founders who must cultivate new leaders and share institutional memory with a "founding fee" or an incentive to stay with the organization past the founding years, everyone gets paid based on a percentage of work. So, if I work 100 hours and you work 10, and we make $1000, you should get paid 10% of any money that comes in, after the founder's incentive is paid out. For more on worker cooperative structures, look to Arizmendi Bakery for ideas, as well as cooperative start-up timebanking models.

6. Internships
I accept barter and mentorships, not unpaid internships. No student should pay for school credits to work as an intern, because no one should pay to go to work. I believe that unpaid internships *can* be valuable if an intern wants to understand the working process of an artist, collective, or institution, and the artist, collective, or institution is able to provide time for this learning. Artists who work within specific crafts will be able to take on unpaid apprentices, training interns in skillsets with the intention to employ them within a craft tradition. Project-based artists, however, can teach research and writing skills, but not much else, as each project employs a new craft tradition and the technical skills any intern might learn are rarely repeated enough to model an apprenticeship process. An internship should be understood as a relationship that is a barter: an equal exchange of labor for clearly articulated learning, recommendations, relationships, or access to resources. Great work is being done on intern rights by Art and Labor in New York and the Carrot Workers Collective in London.

7. The Revolution Will not Be Funded
In case you think that nonprofits will save the world, or that art/activism seeking to engage many participants or a popular movement can support all participants equitably, you should read The Revolution Will Not Be Funded. There is no easy "alternative" to for-benefit, or commoning work, but there are diverse economies that we can navigate with principles. I've written about some options that give me hope here. If you prefer to control the conditions in which you sell your labor, a worker cooperative might be the best model for you. If you prefer to work for the public good, a state-supported arts sector is what you should advocate for locally at your community board, or learn how to lobby for, nationally.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ART

If visitors engage with a work for a day at most, but the work of art takes thousands of hours to research, develop, produce, document, and disseminate in writing, talks, and art world lore, I believe that the production of any work of art, but especially socio-politically engaged work, should be integral to the meaning of the piece. I'm tired of work about sustainability, democracy, or social transformation that is not produced within sustainable, democratic, or transformative systems. "How many uncompensated people labor on the piece?" will change when our livelihoods are supported. It might become: What if humble participation in community was as valuable as the production of new projects? What forms of community and institutional recognition do we each need and desire, and why? Could we do less, and do it really well?

References:
Payment for Services: From Market to Professional Logics of Valuation in Contemporary Artmaking
Classism
Classified
The Revolution Will Not Be Funded
Solidarity Art Worlds

Worker Cooperatives
timebanking for worker cooperatives

Research References:
http://www.guidestar.org/
http://littlesis.org/

Group References:
W.A.G.E.
Feral Trade Network
Exchange Cafe at MoMA
Art and Labor
Carrot Workers Collective
Americans for the Arts

Further Reading:
http://www.artpractical.com/feature/standard_deviation/
http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas
http://www.artandwork.us/
http://bfamfaphd.com/#read
http://solidaritynyc.org/#/resources/resource-library

About the Author:
Caroline Woolard graduated from the only tuition-free art school in the country (Cooper Union, BFA 2006) with a strong commitment to the solidarity economy movement and conceptual art. In 2009, Woolard co-founded three systems for cultural production: a studio space, a barter network, and Trade School. These experimental systems of mutual aid inform and enable her short term projects, including: Exchange Cafe for *Artists Experiment* at the Museum of Modern Art (2013), *The Economy of We* at The University of Massachusetts Amherst (2012), and a *Barricade to Bed* toolkit for a cyberfeminist event at *Eyebeam Art and Technology Center* (2013). Woolard is currently a resident in the Queens Museum Studio Program, a lecturer at Cooper Union and The New School, a coordinator for Trade School, and a member of the New York City Community Land Initiative and To Be Determined, groups working for a network of community land trust in New York City. More information, events, and talks are available at: http://carolinewoolard.com/

LABOR	TRANSACTIONS	PROPERTY	ENTERPRISE	FINANCE
Wage	Market	Private	Capitalist	Mainstream Markets
ALTERNATIVE PAID Self-employed Reciprocal labor In-kind Work for welfare	ALTERNATIVE MARKET Fair trade Alternative currencies Underground market Barter	ALTERNATIVE PRIVATE State-managed assets Customary (clan) land Community land trusts Indigenous knowledge (Intellectual Property)	ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST State owned Environmentally responsible Socially responsible Non-profit	ALTERNATIVE MARKET Cooperative Banks Credit unions Community-based financial institutions Micro-finance
UNPAID Housework Volunteer Self-provisioning Slave labor	NON-MARKET Household sharing Gift giving Hunting, fishing, gathering Theft, piracy, poaching	OPEN ACCESS Atmosphere International Waters Open source IP Outer Space	NON-CAPITALIST Worker cooperatives Sole proprietorships Community enterprise Feudal Slave	NON-MARKET Sweat equity Family lending Donations Interest-free loans

Diverse Economies, Community Economies Collective