

# excerpt from: incredisensual panty raid laff along 2012

BY THE LADIES INVITATIONAL DEADBEAT SOCIETY



## THE VALUE OF OUR (COLLECTIVE) WORK

EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATIONAL SKILLSHARE  
HOSTED BY LIDS, AT JOHN SNOW HOUSE SUNDAY JUNE 17TH, 4PM

Participants: Anthea Black, Nicole Burisch, Bogdan Cheta, Amy Fung, John Grzinich, Noel Heard, Quyen Hoang, Tomas Jonsson, Hye-Seung Jung, Kevin Lo, Wednesday Lupyciw, Kaylin Pearce, Amber Phelps-Bondaroff, Johanna Plant, and Everett Wilson.

*After watching the video "The W.A.G.E. WoManifesto" (recommended to us by CARFAC' Vice President Deirdre Logue) the group is discussing the payment of artist fees.*

**Nicole Burisch (NB):** I really wonder after watching that [W.A.G.E.] video and thinking about CARFAC and our positions within the Canadian situation, if the urgency and the declarative tone of that video... If there's a certain sort of mobilization and coherence around that kind of project, that we don't have in Canada, because we DO have CARFAC and we tend to sort of think that we're okay or something?

**Noel Heard:** Well, they [American artists] are just fighting for the first basic step, right?

**Anthea Black (AB):** And there have been many people who have pointed out that CARFAC fees are a sort of minimum wage, or, a kind of ghetto we fall into the idea that that's the standard, but without actually advocating for more, or higher fees. That might raise the question: does anyone actually survive off of CARFAC fees?

**Amy Fung:** No!

**John Grzinich:** I was going to ask, because I'm not from Canada, are the standards set by CARFAC, are they simply internal to the visual art world, or are they actually recognized by the state?

**Wednesday Lupyciw (WL):** It's recognized by the state funded granting bodies. So like, agencies that get money from local, provincial, and national governments to give to artists. They all recognize CARFAC. But then, at the same time, getting CARFAC has a lot to do with... like, are you hot enough and [exhibiting] enough to get all of these little fees? And also, how

1. CARFAC: Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens



you file your taxes, how you go about translating making the world more interesting through art into economics... I file my taxes as a “fiduciary enterprise”, meaning that I’m sort of like a public service, and what I physically create has no value but I rent out my time, or lend this artwork to the institution, for the greater public good. And I get this fee, I’m trusted with this fee for providing social value, but I can still be taxed on it if I make enough fees, which I never do. I have to have a job. That’s actually the definition of a professional artist from the Canada Council, it’s somebody who would basically give up their day job if they could, but we know they can’t

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**NB:** If as artists, we make sure to ask the artist-run centres and museums to pay us, and maybe they can’t [because of a combination of fixed programming funding and inflation], then it’s sort of like a transference of blame up the ladder. So then the museums are blaming the funding agencies, and the funding agencies are blaming the government, and...

**Amy Fung:** And these are not even real excuses.

**NB:** No. There’s this potential where we end up, as artists resenting the artist-run centre [for not being able to pay us more]. Or, as artist-run administrators, resenting the artists who are asking us for things we can’t give. And that’s not a productive place of tension – at all – in a lot of ways. We should be working together.

**AB:** We were having a discussion about self-funding models like Kickstarter, where you start a campaign to raise funding for a specific project. You make an appeal to your community – which is often other artists, arts administrators, cultural workers – and many artists are seeing this as a new opportunity to fund their projects, but Nicole and I were having this conversation about how that represents a similar kind of privatization of funding as raising tuition fees. It’s passing the social responsibility of a culture to provide specific opportunities like education, to the individual. So, you end up giving money to things that you really believe in, but essentially it’s not addressing that broader economic issue, which is how we actually arrive at equitable funding structures.

**NB:** We’d rather be paying those monies as taxes?

**AB:** Exactly.

**Amy Fung:** So, okay, Kickstarter and these campaigns, I participate in those, because of the people who are doing [the projects]. But where am I going to draw the line – am I going to do a Kickstarter campaign to get a bus pass at some point in my life? Why are we paying out of our own pockets for services that are actually, fundamentally, a part of our society? Why is everything privatized at this point? Where is that money going, I’m paying up my ass in taxes, what happens to that money? Does it go toward the oil sands? This is a big argument in the States now: “that’s our tax dollars, we can do what we want”. But we’re not actually standing up for what we want from our tax dollars.

**AB:** The accusation that’s always leveled against the arts when someone feels that they disagree with the project, or they disagree with something that’s happening, is “my tax dollars paid for this and I do not support it”. Which in some ways is a fallacy, because of course we [all] pay into a number of different projects, and infrastructures, and subsidies – things like oil companies or other big businesses that we might not support. So to have that accusation leveled against us [artists] is, to me, something that always particularly stings.

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*Kevin Lo from Artivistic discusses translating the sharing of resources into dollar value.*

**Kevin Lo:** It’s beyond sharing. This will probably sound naïve, but we can’t put a monetary value on things that are essential to keep [Artivistic] going. With Artivistic, **work-ing as a collective is really about understanding collective processes as another way in which we manage to be effective. we tend to take a lot more time, and are slower [than some organizations], but in a sense this is more sustainable.**

As far as practical tools, that's somewhere to start. None of us have worked as "real" artists, so we come at this from a different perspective. But in terms of organizing and sustaining our activities – I've worked with a lot of collectives who bridge the art and activism gap here in Montréal – it's always a struggle to build up the time and trust of each other's abilities. It's about having that very flexible infrastructure where that is allowed to happen, where people aren't prescribed to their roles and there can be a lot of overlap in what people are doing. We don't get funding, so we have to learn to scratch each other's backs.

**AB:** One of the things that is really exciting is when artists, or people who don't identify primarily as artists work in various institutional structures, with this idea of being parasites. Different institutional structures can be used to further a critical or political practice. To bring this back to the ideas that W.A.G.E. is putting forward – they explicitly identify as a feminist collective, and talk about artistic labour through the lens of feminism a lot. They're very much invested in this promiscuous or flexible movement through various institutional structures, funding campaigns, and activist projects. The culmination of all of this expertise, being able to draw from those support structures and infrastructures at different times is what actually allows them to survive. To mash this back into the Canadian scene, combining CARFAC fees with a job at an artist-run centre or a job in an economy that's not related to the art world – for example Wednesday cleans houses as one of her side jobs – patches things together with creative accounting. This seems like a brilliant intervention into the structure that governs a legibility of practice. Accounting for the time and exchange of services between, for example Artivistic and [Centre] Skol, has actually hacked the system in a very small but real way.

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**John Grzinich:** As an artist, I'm living well below the poverty line as considered in most countries, but I never think of myself as being poor. I look at what I have, in terms of quality of life, and if I value what I have in terms of quality of life in comparison to people who are also labeled as being poor – say, immigrant communities – there's really no comparison. In a sense, I can't even touch that in terms of monetary definition; I'm essentially giving away everything I do for what I would see as a greater public good. Regardless if people see it or understand it as that. I don't even think about it, because in a way if I did, it would get a bit ugly. I would start labeling myself, "oh, I'm a poor person". **I can't imagine what life would be without the things that I do have, the community that I have, and the people that I know, all that.** I don't know how much it should be emphasized.

**WL:** There's this really crazy article [by Jennifer Allen] in the Syphon magazine we were looking at [*Syphon Vol. 1, Issue 4 Winter 2012, published by Modern Fuel artist-run centre*]. It made me think about what you were saying. The writer, summarizing a talk that Martha Rosler gave, states that artists enjoy certain privileges even though they have no money. She talks about how artists are always getting audited, because, for example, the average number of flights an artist takes per year is pretty crazy high when compared to a non-artist person, but on the

other hand the artist has no money to show for it. The author advocates for every immigrant, every disenfranchised and poor person, every queer kid to become an artist, because it's an easy way to enjoy richness of life. Reading this is a really big What The Fuck?! moment, but then, in this analysis of Martha Rosler's speech, the idea of artists, quality of life, "value", and money is really formalized. And here, we're talking more in vague terms of "feeling the love", or being excited about our lives. **on one level we're totally poor, but on another level we're really connected.**

Are we also talking about "belonging"?

**John Grzinich:** For sure. On one hand, I have a very middle class background, but I don't live at all in a middle class standard now. I'm far below that, but I think that what I actually have is far better, far more rich...

**Amy Fung:** To counterargue that: we have the privilege of living below the middle class. That's the difference, right? We have the choice to live these beautifully inspired lives, but that's actually still a class thing.

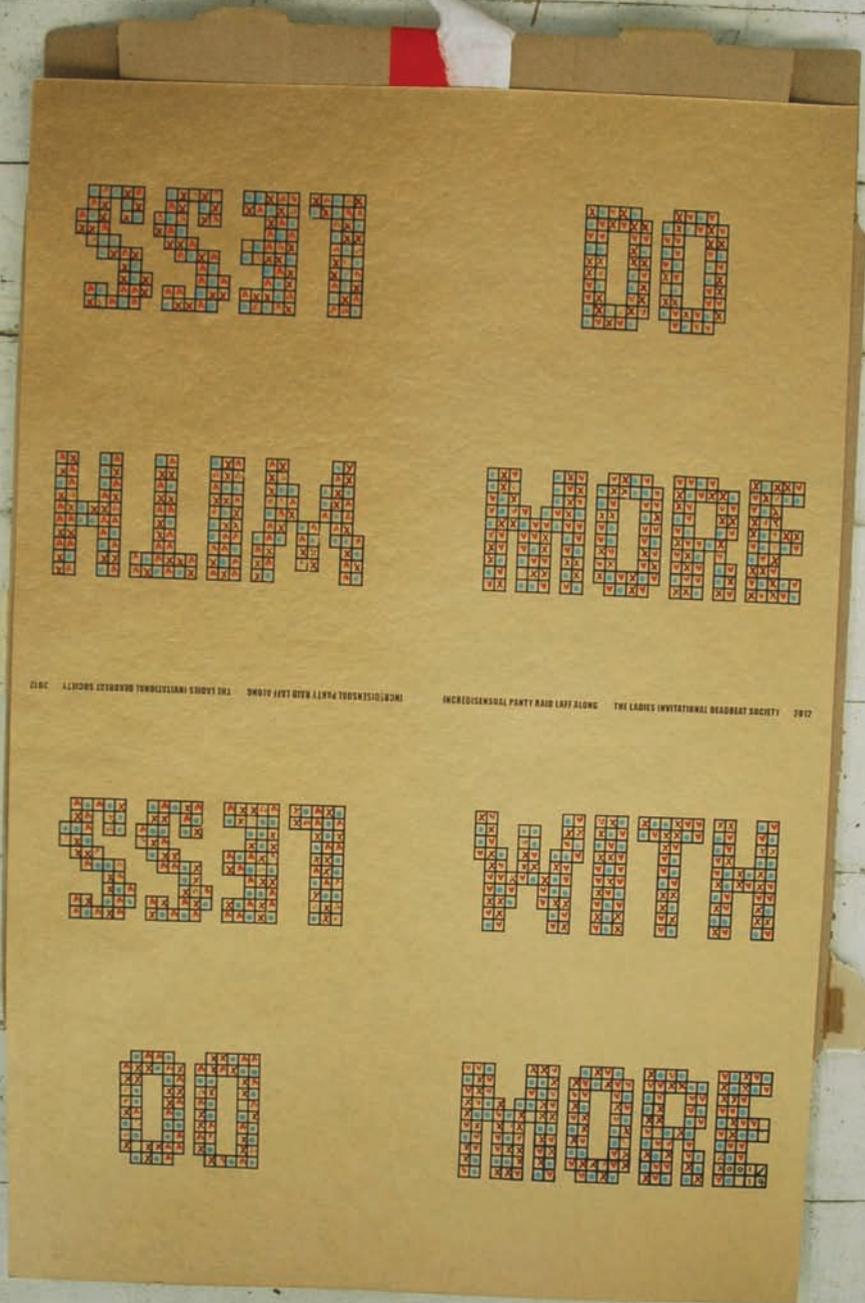
**AB:** I think that **it's a real mistake to glamorize poverty or the idea of being low-income without actually contributing in solidarity to other kinds of social and political discussions that are happening, that really do seek to address economic inequities.**

We [artists] have an important voice, and an important place in our culture, and people actually do respect and listen to what we say. I think that this is something we can wield with more responsibility, when it comes to talking about issues of pay equity, et cetera. Like, how many artists have done a protest about the raising of retirement age to 67 [in Canada], or how many artists have done an action that relates to the student strike in Québec, or other social movements that could use our voice?

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**AB:** The idea that some lives are worth more than other lives is really problematic. The idea that an artist's life is worth more than someone who's suffering from homelessness' life – that is an instance where we have to recognize our own privilege. It becomes slippery quite quickly when you think of how society assigns economic or cultural value to bodies and to lives.

**Hye-Seung Jung:** I think as an artist sometimes I question myself. Is it a luxury I have, to make art and spend the time doing it? I have trouble justifying it because I don't generate very much income – I get funding here and there, and sometimes work a little bit. If I'm in some place like a Safeway, I look at the cashiers as I'm buying something, and I see "oh, these people are



working hard” and I know that I also work hard, but, like you said, this artist work isn’t somehow better work than the working of the cashier. In reality, I don’t have many skills. I’m not a designer, and I don’t have skills to earn more than, say, 13 dollars per hour.

**Amy Fung:** Well, there’s the system that makes us value each other against each other. Structurally, it’s a problem. As a writer, I can make maybe 9 cents a word, maybe because we have no other way of valuing it. I think this question of how things start, it begins with actions. We have to make the actions. We can’t wait for someone else to make the actions. In burnout culture, we stop thinking. In the group of people who’ve just graduated from art school, the attrition rate or the number of drop-outs from the art world is so high. Especially for women, and people of colour – basically anyone who’s not a white man to be honest, which is still that dead line... Enrollment in art school has gone up exponentially, I think something like 3 times what it was in the 1970s, but the translation to exhibition for these groups has remained the same, somewhere around 30 percent. So looking at the facts, looking at the numbers, okay, it’s clear that we actually have to be the change, we actually have to start demanding things because we can’t just follow the lead. There’s an urgency that we’ve lost, for some reason. For some reason we think feminism, and other things, are over.

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**Bogdan Cheta:** I think about this idea of generosity, and how it’s kind of an economic machine. Who can participate within the generosity space? People who go to school and have good relationships with other people? What if you don’t speak good English, or you’re not good at writing, or you have some barrier that doesn’t allow you to be... receiving? So then, who gets to climb further? who gets to be generous?

**WL:** Yeah- who has the right to give and receive in the generous space? Especially in that new time when an artist starts their career?

**AB:** That kind of question brings up the important issue of scarcity, and what we do when we’re faced with scarcity. Do we combat each other in the face of scarcity, or do we actually find collective ways that are encompassing of multiple differences and perspectives? This is a really central question not only in artistic organizing, but in activist organizing — how to hold a multiplicity of voices and allow a multiplicity of perspectives to participate in group work, or collective generosity.

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**AB:** The intensification of educational funding issues can be seen in the fact that we're moving towards the PhD being the terminal degree for art practice. So this means that, like many other disciplines, it's no longer a guarantee of success in your field to just have an undergraduate, or even a graduate degree. Again, we feed back into some of the questions of the student strike: how long are you willing to go to school for, **how far are you willing to go into debt to receive one of these limited opportunities in this tough market?**

Noel Heard had raised the question of academia, how it provides some structures that define our discipline. So, if people who have access to academia are rising to higher and higher levels and gaining the best opportunities, where does that leave the broader, surplus pool [of artists]? This surplus pool becomes increasingly stratified, so it seems to me to be an important place to insert collective activity, and to put a wrench into that increased hierarchization.

**Kevin Lo:** The organizing models that are happening in the student strike in Québec aren't perfect models, but there's a lot of interesting experimentation that can be something for people not in Québec to learn from. Especially how the strike issues are being built into a broader movement, beyond just tuition fees. Working in the arts has been a historic class struggle, and we shouldn't be afraid to use that, or look at the history of organizing against struggle, and realize that actually, we're not doing okay. If we look at things in terms of class, we see that we need to mobilize, we need to organize, otherwise we're just going to get more and more fucked.

**NB:** Should we end this part with a "This Is Class War" chant?

**AB:** Yeah!

**Everyone:** THIS IS CLASS WAR! FROM CALGARY

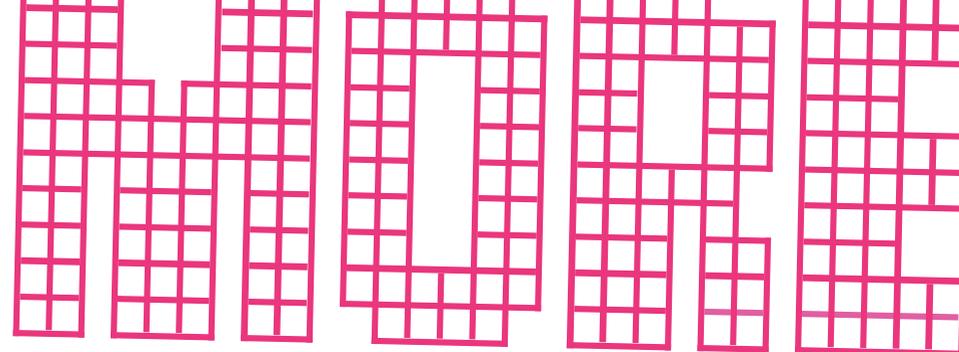
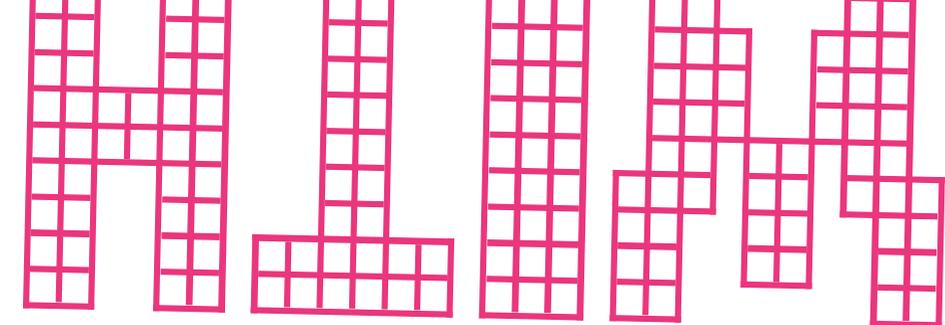
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**AB:** I think we can question the enduring faith that artistic genius is possessed by one person. **we have a fear that people might think you're less of an artist if you acknowledge that you're part of a network of people who all contribute different things**. By saying "this person edited my text, this person transcribed the interview, this person lent me this object that I used", people worry that this somehow makes you less of an artist.

**Amy Fung:** **That is the most generous thing we can do, to acknowledge that our ideas aren't ours, but everyone's.**

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**AB:** Some museum workers are unionized, in bigger institutions. But, most often the unions are blocked by the museum management in very persistent and active ways. This is something that's never reported in the standard press, or even the art press – issues with collective bargaining.

**NB:** In [the same] copy of *Syphon*, there's a really great text about art workers and precarity [by James Goddard], particularly around this model where we all work different contract jobs, none of them with health care benefits and none of them with unions. This was the promise of the concept of working from home – flexibility – and that model was sold to us in these really glorious terms, how we would be so free. But, what it means is that we work alone and in patchy ways that make it impossible to unionize and impossible to band together with other people in similar circumstances, to ask for benefits, or better conditions, or decent wages.

**The fragmentation of the creative labour force, which feels so free sometimes, is perhaps not the best freedom.**

**Quyen Hoang:** There is this idea that you should be so thankful for your job in the arts. We don't know about agency and collective bargaining. It's not like we're essential services – if artists go on strike, is the public going to care? How are they going to see this action?

**WL:** Is an artist and art workers union the goal, or not?

**NB:** Again, the Québec student strike is a really interesting model, because students aren't providing an essential service, either. The complete shutdown of the University, it's not like losing the ambulance workers. Who's going to miss University if students go on strike? The way that the students have mobilized and garnered popular support has effectively shut down all of the universities and CEGEPs all across the province. The untold story is that those strikes were almost 5 years in the planning, and there was a really long trajectory of consensus-based decision making, and collective work, and scheming and planning. And a long history of striking and protesting. I don't know exactly how this translates to an arts model, but I think a student strike is a really interesting place to look, because it's a different form of labour and participation. You wouldn't think it would work!

**Amber Phelps-Bondaroff:** I heard a really good suggestion about the student strike, that all of the students should just stop going to their part-time jobs. And then the whole city wouldn't be able to have any coffee, or whatever, and then everyone would totally get the message!

**NB:** Beyond the impact that the strike has had on the universities, the marches and demonstrations are continuing to have an effect on the economic functioning of Montréal. Major complaints have been coming in from business owners downtown, who aren't making as much money as they normally would, because of the disturbances. How do you leverage your power in cases like this?

**AB:** I think the media language around popular movements that erupt and come to a head – movements like the student strike or the Arab Spring – cuts off the movements from their histories. This makes them seem like anomalies. This idea that the 2012 Québec student strike has a rich history of strikes dating back to the 1960s, is an idea that gets lost when we talk about the 2012 strike “erupting” out of nowhere. I think it's the same in movements that activate in the art world. For instance, we think of the founding of CARFAC – it seems like such a far away and remote thing, but in fact all of those little steps lead us to exactly where we are today. There are important trajectories and continuities that happen as a part of a broader movement, but it's so rarely spoken about as if it is an actual movement. **That might be one way that we can change the way we talk about this issue, is seeing it as a movement for recognition of the value of cultural work. As opposed to a singular moment.**

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