

Still Performing Austerity: Artists, Work, and Economic Speculation

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Still Performing Austerity: Artists, Work,
and Economic Speculation

ANTHEA BLACK In October 2014, Nicole Burisch and I co-chaired the panel *Performing Austerity: Artists, Work, and Economic Speculation* at the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) conference held at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU) in Toronto. We began with an interest in examining the rich history of artworks that engage with economic exchange—from artists’ storefronts and corporations to dropout culture and performative actions of refusal. However, negotiating the current climate of austerity budgets and precarious labour led us to ask practical questions about how artists, cultural workers, and institutions adapt and produce identities within such exploitative economic systems.

Shannon Stratton, Michael Maranda, and Kirsty Robertson all presented papers on this topic. We then incorporated the issues they raised and our introduction to the panel into an edited letter we delivered to the UAAC Board of Directors. These issues remain just as urgent today. Our 2014 letter is reprinted here, with a postscript in which I reflect upon academic precarity in the current moment. ¶

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The following letter, along with a response by UAAC President Anne Whitelaw, was posted on the “Advocacy” section of the UAAC website in 2014. Whitelaw’s response is reprinted after the 2018 postscript to the original letter.

October 31, 2014

Dear Colleagues, Artists, and Academics
of the UAAC community,

It isn’t news that working conditions in academia and the economic landscape of higher education in arts and humanities have worsened in the last several years. On the occasion of the twenty-fourth annual Universities Art Association of Canada conference we find ourselves challenged by the difficulties of working in this climate, just as we are heartened to once again join you in dialogue and scholarship. To introduce our October 24, 2014 panel, *Performing Austerity: Artists, Work, and Financial Speculation*, as well as our colleagues Kirsty Robertson, Michael Maranda, and Shannon Stratton, we read an open draft of this letter. The text that follows has been expanded to include commentary from a number of additional voices, and represents a desire to bring together artists, cultural workers, and academics for a discussion on what is to be done in the face of great economic pressure in the arts and beyond.

Over the course of our careers working as artists, independent arts writers, arts administrators, and academics, we’ve relished the ways that a single problem or research subject like “performing austerity” can be examined in multiple ways—and known more fully—by taking on various roles. “Wearing many hats” is a professional requirement for many in the Canadian arts community, though it is less often acknowledged as a survival tactic or a way to generate practice-based revenue. Like many artist-academics, we quite enjoy working in this way—what

Michael Maranda calls a peer-driven “work preference economy.” Or at least we thought we did. More recently, as we run ragged running interference between artist-run models, museums, funders, and academic institutions, not to mention the bank and the dentist, the bad affects of boundary-less work have caught up with us. As Gina Badger acknowledges in the editorial for the final issue of *FUSE*, “We have come to the conclusion that this is no longer a viable project under current conditions.”¹

The irony of the situation does not escape us: as we circulated the call for this panel to Canadian artists, critics, theorists, and writers who we consider essential voices in this conversation, we received much interest in reply. However, our colleagues—especially those working outside of academia or as part of the academic precariat—raised questions about speakers fees. They had a clear message that they urged us to raise directly at UAAC: our respected colleagues were unwilling or unable to participate without remuneration for their labour. The myth of “exposure” should now be well understood as more exploitative than of real benefit for artists and cultural producers.

The reason we are writing to you today is to acknowledge that all who attend UAAC are paying to be here—whether we can afford it or not—and many more are not attending for this very reason. For those of us who practice as both artists and academics, this makes us financial speculators caught between two conflicting economic systems, neither of which offer a wholly viable way of making one’s way in the world. Academia, which is fuelled by a highly exploitable labour force that is often all too hungry to “pay to play” at conferences like UAAC and the College Art Association, increasingly mashes up against an art world marked by outworn myths that devalue artistic labour, and the greatest class disparity between artists in history. All the while, both the art world and academia continue to weather increasing corporatization and the effects of “neoliberal assault[s] on public sector funding.”² Canadian art-

ists have already fought to establish artist’s fees through CARFAC, while new models are under development through the American activist group W.A.G.E.,³ and others still are working in off-grid, collective, and DIY capacities.

While we understand that academic conference structures operate differently than the Canadian gallery and museum sectors, which use the CARFAC recommended fee schedule, these structures are not unrelated. It is time to open a space for dialogue and exchange around how—or even if—our academic labour is being compensated. There must be other options. We desperately need to make room for dialogues and development of new economic systems—and ways of presenting work—in the arts.

Artists and academics are a surplus labour force, that is, we are highly exploitable, and the functioning of both the art market and academia depend on it. But perhaps the greatest economic speculators in the field right now are our students, MFAs and PhDs in studio art programs, and sessional faculty. Student debt may well be the next mortgage crisis, with \$15 billion owed to the Canadian Government, \$8 billion to provinces, banks, and private sources, and up to \$1 trillion in the United States.⁴ Despite the undeniable social capital of working in the arts, participating in culture making and higher education (either as a student or a faculty member) means assuming great financial risk. This is a trade many of us are willing to make, though we no longer model the “starving artist” or “rich complainer.” Instead, we assume identities as financial speculators, precarious workers, or dropouts. Enrolment is declining in the arts and humanities and, as Shannon Stratton discusses in her paper, “Off the Grid Education, Autodidacts and Collectivity: Do we need institutional MFAs?,” perhaps “dropping out” of academia, reimagining pedagogical models to suit us more, and working off-grid could be preferable to pursuing a costly terminal arts degree.⁵

Performing austerity alongside these risks might have rich affective rewards: critical and commercial success, rec-

1. Gina Badger, “Editorial, Do Less With Less,” *FUSE Magazine* 37, 1 (Winter 2013–2014), (accessed October 29, 2014). After 38 years in operation, Canadian arts periodical *FUSE Magazine* closed up shop in 2014, signing off with the collectively authored, yet anonymous article, “Art, Austerity and the Production of Fear.” The magazine was an important public platform for critical dialogue and exchange on the most pressing issues in contemporary arts, culture, and politics. As contributors to this field, the membership of UAAC should be concerned about what it means to lose yet another forum for the dissemination of our work.

2. Anonymous, “Art, Austerity and the Production of Fear,” *FUSE Magazine* 37, 1 (Winter 2013–2014).

3. “Working Artists and the Greater Economy is a New York-based activist organization founded in 2008. Our mission is to establish sustainable economic relationships between artists and the institutions that contract our labor, and to introduce mechanisms for self-regulation into the art field that collectively bring about a more equitable distribution of its economy.” See “What is W.A.G.E.?” *Working Artists and the Greater Economy*, <https://wageforwork.com/home> (accessed April 2, 2018).

4. Canadian Federation of Students, “Student Debt in Canada: Education Shouldn’t Be a Debt Sentence,” fact sheet, Fall 2013, <http://cfs-fcee.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/11/Factsheet-2013-11-Student-Debt-EN.pdf>; and “Student Debt,” Wikipedia, last modified March 12, 2016, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_debt (both accessed October 23, 2014).

ognition, passion, international travel, “living the dream,” the list goes on, but it doesn’t add up to a living wage. As Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble said in a recent lecture, the arts is a “tremendous pleasure economy” where “we just cannot get affect and reason to line up: we know we are being exploited, but we don’t want to feel like we’re being exploited.”⁶ To put the wage struggle of artists in relation to the many pressing labour abuses of global capitalism, Canadian critic cheyanne turions reminds us that “the condition of precarity” is experienced unevenly.⁷ While we have relative intellectual freedom to discuss the conditions of our labour through public dialogue, an entire global workforce remains exploited and largely invisible. turions rightly calls for recognition of global labour issues and solidarity with workers in other fields as an essential part of this conversation.

How do we imagine an organization like UAAC working to respond to these concerns? First, the suggestions to increase subsidies for under-represented groups and to lower rates for non-tenured members that were discussed at the 2014 Annual General Meeting seem to have uptake amongst UAAC membership. Or more broadly, how can we work to find solidarity between academics and artists, who are arguably experiencing the same effects? We don’t have a solution to this yet, but if we think—and act—collectively, we could come up with one. We’re also compelled by how the sectoral bargaining strategies proposed by Winnie Ng, CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy at Ryerson University, could work within the arts and academia.⁸ Imagine, for example, if faculty associations, academics at all stages of their careers, and our strong student unions joined artist advocacy groups, artist-run associations, and employees at major galleries and museums to raise awareness about the value of public, accessible arts education and fair compensation across the sector? We consider this letter and the three papers given by Stratton, Maranda, and Robertson as a way to begin a broad discus-

sion amongst the UAAC membership on performing, analyzing, and critically thinking austerity in these challenging economic times.

We would like to sign off by inviting you to sign onto this letter, circulate it, propose revisions, maybe fight a bit about the finer points, all with the goal of expanding it to address the broader UAAC community in good time.

Thank you,

Anthea Black, artist, Sessional Faculty, Printmaking, Publications, Criticism and Curatorial Practice, and Art and Social Change, OCAD University (2013–2017); and Assistant Professor of Printmedia, California College of the Arts (2018).

Nicole Burisch, writer, Core Program Critic-in-Residence, Museum of Fine Arts Houston (2014–2016); and Curatorial Assistant, National Gallery of Canada (2018)

Michael Maranda, Principal Researcher, Waging Culture; Assistant Curator, Art Gallery of York University (2018).

Kirsty Robertson, Associate Professor, Contemporary Art and Museum Studies, University of Western Ontario (2018).

Shannon Stratton, founder and Executive Director, Threewalls, Chicago (2003–2015); MA student, Art History, Theory and Criticism and Fiber and Material Studies, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2005–2015); and the William and Mildred Lasdon Chief Curator, Museum of Art and Design, New York (2018).

We would like to thank the many colleagues who offered critical feedback, editorial suggestions, and support in preparing this letter, and who have continued the conversation through the UAAC community.

5. Shannon Stratton, “Off the Grid Education, Autodidacts, and Collectivity: Do we need Institutional MFAs?” (paper, Universities Art Association of Canada conference, OCAD University, Toronto, October 24, 2014).

6. Steve Kurtz (public lecture, OCAD University, Toronto, October 5, 2014).

7. cheyanne turions, “Youth in Revolt: Precarious Labour, the Young Curator and Sectorial Burn Out in the Media Arts,” November 17, 2013, <http://cheyanneturions.wordpress.com/2013/11/17/1781/> (accessed October 29 2014). A version of this text was also published in *Syphon* 2, 3 (Winter 2014).

8. Winnie Ng, “The evolution of the Academic Worker” (lecture, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, October 29, 2014).

Postscript

ANTHEA BLACK When we first delivered this letter, the UAAC community acted quickly, both at the board level and through dialogue brought forward by members of the community in the form of innovative panels and critical discussions at future conferences. Formally, UAAC established new supports for sessional faculty, graduate students, and working-artist members. However, the 2016 session “*Be Nice or Leave: Killjoys, Academic Citizenship and the Politics of Getting Along*,” convened by Susan Cahill, Kristy Holmes, and Erin Morton, was a watershed moment of solidarity around issues of unpaid academic labour and focused the conversation directly on the extra burden of emotional/affective labour that Black, Indigenous, People of Colour, women, and LGBTQ+ faculty members bear in academia and the arts.

I often wonder what a radical overhaul of the arts and academic system would look like. Would it resemble boycott and divestment, abolitionist, or reform work that confronts the colonial state, the prison system, or the police? Some might bristle at those parallels, but for many they’re obvious: the intersections between academia and other forms of state power and their reliance on the structures of racism, white supremacy, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia have been built to function in this way. Without action, they stay rooted. The history of activism—by artists, students, and colleagues in faculty associations and unions—offers foundational, collective movements and opportunities to confront economic precarity, not just for contract staff, but also for artists, students, graduates, and workers in other sectors. Forms of advocacy and pedagogy that challenge power must be intertwined with our core work. I recently finished co-editing *HANDBOOK: Supporting Queer and Trans Students in Art and Design Education* (2017) with Shamina Chherawala. The project offered me and my colleagues an incredible antidote to the academic depression Andrea Terry describes in her introduction to this section.

We envisioned the book as a community-building project, a pedagogical intervention directly within the studios and classes we sought to address, and an imbedded critique that would be too great to be denied. The project was not an institutional initiative, but instead one that drew contributions from over 100 students, alumni, staff, and faculty, because they were *interested*, not mandated to perform.

We can also look towards the Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC), the Canadian artist-run centre network, and the Canada Council for the Arts as each offer funding models supporting the research, creation, and dissemination of new work and compensation of artistic labour. Whenever I mention CARFAC and the payment of artist fees in academia, someone gently reminds me that things are different here—as if I didn’t enter academia with over a decade of artist-run and institutional curatorial activism and first-hand observations of how exploitative the myths of exposure, promotion, and professional recognition can be. True, tensions between CARFAC and academic labour seem, at times, irreconcilable, because they are built on two very different value systems, one that centres the artist (and their labour) and one that has largely functioned through the exploitation and institutionalization of cultural labour. We need to take research that centres artists, practitioners, and students—rather than buying into the narratives that align with the goals of administrators and finance people—seriously to inform and support decision-making.

The question remains: How can we change the current structures as equitably as possible? I was recently inspired by a colleague who, in his role on the faculty association, created a spreadsheet to show how easy (and actually cheap) it would be for OCADU to bring sessional/contract wages to parity with permanent faculty. Perplexingly, the university projected it would cost many millions more, using *their* figures to dismiss the issue altogether. While it is true that fair compensation for contract workers and increasing job

security is important, it can just as easily become a stopgap measure or keep us working overtime for the carrot of the tenure-track job that often doesn't materialize. There will be no golden moment when the fight stops and we all have the tenure job of our dreams. If you are lucky enough to have one, then I respectfully suggest you turn your attention to understanding and improving the experience of BIPOC, queer, and transgender students at your institution.

The process of rebalancing sessional, contract, and permanent faculty ratios is a stressful one, and change is riskiest for precarious workers. As discussed in *Be Nice or Leave*, those who play nice and make things pleasant for administrators are rewarded, while people who already shoulder the burden of doing equity work are either tokenized as representatives of the diversity goals of the institution or treated as completely expendable. I recently observed how just one tenure-track hire (combined with the real pressure of lowered enrolment across the fine arts) meant dramatic reduction or elimination of sessional faculty. These positions were held by a woman of colour, a person with a disability, a genderqueer person, and a Francophone, and all were also working artists/cultural producers.

Since we wrote the above letter, Nicole Bursich was hired as a contract-staff curator at the National Gallery of Canada, and I left my colleagues and Toronto family for a tenure-track faculty position in California. Just like everyone else, we still get an alarming number of requests to write for free, front money for projects, pay our own travel, or sign pathetic contracts way below living wage, and sometimes the answer is just, "No thank you." Sometimes it's a sad goodbye. Now the UAAC conference is an exciting reunion with colleagues I miss deeply—often such conferences are a rare opportunity for large gatherings of kill-joys and like-minded cultural producers to come together, and I am encouraged by the UAAC Board's receptivity to welcome such discussions and to make structural changes—and it feels good, so I still pay to attend. ¶

December 5, 2014

Dear Anthea and Nicole,

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the potential role that UAAC can play in addressing the current conditions of employment precarity for so many academic workers in Canada. Your letter clearly and passionately outlines not only the challenges experienced by many of our highly qualified colleagues as they face dwindling opportunities, but also the responsibility that academic institutions—including UAAC—must bear for ensuring more ethical and equitable working conditions for sessional faculty.

The UAAC Board discussed your letter at its recent board conference call meeting. We all concur that the current situation for sessional faculty—within the studies and the practice sectors—is unsustainable and exploitative. As an academic association with a growing commitment to advocacy work, we will encourage our institutional members and universities' leaders to consider carefully the long-term pedagogical and research impact of relying on underpaid and unsupported academic labour to do the work of the university. It is abundantly clear to us all that while more permanent positions must be created, the immediate need is to adequately compensate sessional faculty for both their teaching and research activities by raising salaries and establishing long-term contracts that reflect the actual work of highly qualified professionals.

With respect to the specific issues raised in your letter, there are some areas where UAAC can take action and others where it can advocate. Concerning art institutions' and art historians' reliance on the unpaid labour of artists, we absolutely concur: artists inside and outside the academy should be paid for the work they do, and that includes payment for use of images and speaking fees to artists who are invited to present on their work. The latter issue can only partially be addressed by UAAC. As a scholarly, rather