DISSENT

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Wages for Facebook

The art campaign Wages for Facebook is an attempt to unsettle the digital marketization of our relationships that many of us have already come to accept as normal.

When visitors enter the University Art Gallery at the University of California, San Diego, they normally find a white reception desk to their left with an attendant tapping at a laptop. However, during the exhibition *And How Are We Feeling Today?*, the reception area was transformed by an imaginary political campaign: Wages for Facebook. Bright posters of currency symbols adorned the front of a table, and on top visitors could find campaign buttons featuring a fist in a blue outline reminiscent of Facebook's "Like" button scattered among books such as *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* by Christian Fuchs and *Who Owns the Future?* by Jaron Lanier. Amid the campaign paraphernalia was an iPad displaying a silently scrolling web page with text in all caps:

THEY SAY IT'S FRIENDSHIP. WE SAY IT'S UNWAGED WORK. WITH EVERY LIKE, CHAT, TAG OR POKE OUR SUBJECTIVITY TURNS THEM A PROFIT. THEY CALL IT SHARING. WE CALL IT STEALING. WE'VE BEEN BOUND BY THEIR TERMS OF SERVICE FAR TOO LONG—IT'S TIME FOR OUR TERMS.

Laurel Ptak has been mulling over the manifesto *Wages for Facebook* for over a year now. She first publicly presented a version of it last April at the Photographic Universe II, a two-day conference organized by the Aperture Foundation and the New School. She prefaced the reading by telling the assembled academics, artists, and students that she was attempting an experiment of sorts, and she ended the presentation on a speculative note. "What might be possible if we tried to mobilize the idea or the conversation around wages for Facebook?"

During the Q&A that followed, a young woman sputtered a question into the microphone: if we accepted money for Facebook, did that mean Facebook could then dictate what photographs we took? She was incredulous. "It just . . . I'm having trouble with your argument, because I feel like people aren't donating to Facebook. People are donating to their social presence, you know what I mean?" she said. "And it's all about social presence on the Internet. It's not really about exchange with the corporation. It's about . . . Internet is the only free media we have left. So, there's no reason . . ." She stopped speaking and handed the microphone over to her friend who talked about how Instagram allows a person to take a picture of the Mona Lisa and put it up on her wall.

Ptak, who is a curator by trade, had floated her ideas in a class she taught at Parsons The New School for Design called "Social and Documentary Practices in Visual Media." Her undergraduate students seemed to sense that something was amiss when Facebook placed their photos in advertisements, but it was still difficult for them to make the leap she wanted them to make: recasting themselves as laborers in the digital economy. "When students asked questions, it was like they malfunctioned," Ptak told me over coffee at a diner near Eyebeam, an art and technology institute where she was recently a fellow. "It was almost like I had said, your mother's really ugly. That's how angry some young people seemed about this idea."

Many on the left had been similarly infuriated by the campaign Wages for Housework, which demanded state remuneration for the housewife. The campaign began when a coalition of radical feminists from Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, and France gathered in Padua, a university town just west of Venice, and formed the International Feminist Collective in 1972. After opening a Brooklyn branch, Silvia Federici, one of the organization's cofounders, wrote the manifesto *Wages Against Housework*, which became Ptak's inspiration.

This limpid rage coursing through Federici's writing takes on new meaning almost forty years later. "I realized that if you swapped out the word housework for Facebook that 80 percent of this text was still totally crystal clear, and it really freaked me out," said Ptak. Ptak's own elegant, angry manifesto has bewildered as much as it has enlivened. Some people on Twitter wondered if this wasn't all a joke, while others took to sampling the text. Others were enraged by the way the auto-scroll refused to give the user any control—a sly metaphor for the invisible hand of social media. One article for the *International Business Times* had the headline: "'Wages for Facebook' Campaign Demands Pay for Social Media Activity." While Ptak had not sent the URL out herself, it still wound its way through the porous walls of the Internet. Ironically, 80 percent of links to the site come from Facebook itself, and the city with the fourth most visitors was Menlo Park, California, home to Facebook headquarters. "Those three words"—Wages for Facebook—"get you to the heart of something that you might not otherwise recognize as a social condition," said Ptak.

Within Marxist circles in the early 1970s, the home was not considered a site for political struggle. In the classic formulation, workers created surplus value through participation in waged work—something women did not do. The ideal Italian woman would fulfill housewifely duties like cooking, cleaning, and having sex with her husband, for the good of the family and, by extension, the state. Writing in response to *Wages Against Housework* in the American monthly *Liberation*, Carol Lopate defended housework as a "kind of utopia" because the work came "out of love rather than . . . financial reward." It was this very "unwaged condition of housework" that Federici and her cohort believed

was "the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that *housework is not work*, thus preventing women from struggling against it." Mystifying domestic labor was crucial for the smooth functioning of capital.

"I think they understood it as an impossible demand," said Ptak. "They thought it would raise people's consciousness, and I think that for me is where it's been the most interesting and instructive. . . . [T]o say that we'll get wages for housework doesn't mean that we'll continue to do it." Ptak stresses the same point in her text: that demanding wages for Facebook is not simply asking for "a thing, a lump of money," but rather advocating a "political perspective." "How do you politicize people about a condition of exploitation that society doesn't really want you or allow you to see very easily?"

In the introduction to her most recent book, *Revolution at Point Zero*, Federici describes Mario Tronti's theory of the "social factory," wherein "every social relation is subsumed under capital and the distinction between society and factory collapses, so that society becomes a factory and social relations *directly become relations of production*." The theory applies uncannily well to Web 2.0. What are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms doing if not commodifying our relationships? A collection of essays edited by Trebor Scholz called *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* focuses on this question. Scholz and other academics like NYU professor Andrew Ross have dubbed this phenomenon "playbor," where the distinction between the professional and private spheres is blurred. Writing about immaterial labor in the mid-1990s, Maurizio Lazzarato warned that capital's grip would only grow tighter as it sought "to involve even the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value."

Digital labor theorists have come to borrow the idea of a "general intellect" from Marx's *Grundrisse*: a creative hive of interconnectivity that produces endless value for a select few. In his essay "In Search of the Lost Paycheck," Ross calls this "the vast network of cooperative knowledge that is the source and agent of the cognitive mode of production." In the process of creating our digital selves—listing our habits and preferences, choosing to "like" and retweet certain items, and amassing followers—we allow businesses to extract value from our preferences, personality, and relationships.

"The last frontier is actually interiority," Michelle Hyun, the curator of the UCSD exhibit, told me over Skype. "It's about recognizing how our relationships and what we thought were protected spaces of interiority or our privacy or agency as subjects is the new farm or a source of value extraction and accumulation for capital. That freaks me out."

As a freelance writer who is too young to feign ignorance but old enough to remember a life before the Internet, I have been told that it is important to "brand yourself." So at the beginning of the year, I revived my Twitter account and changed the user handle, previously an inside joke that was funny to about three people, to my given name. I went onto Facebook and asked my friends to follow me. Maybe six of them did. At the time of this writing, I have seventy-seven followers, which means that I am roughly as popular as a houseplant.

I am a bad worker. In an ever-expanding economy of freelancers, you are required to have a social media presence. You don't get to say that you are unpublished, because you can always self-publish; you don't get to say that no one knows who you are, because you can self-promote. Basic HTML, search engine optimization, and knowledge

of some kind of content management system are all "life skills." No work? You're out of excuses, lazybones. Ptak does not have a Facebook account herself, but she empathizes with those who feel compelled to have one. "When people find out you're not on Facebook, they're like, 'Are you serious? How do you live?'" Unsurprisingly, social media presence has itself been commodified by a company named Klout, which measures your influence on social networks and gives chosen users "perks," or free products from various brands ostensibly piggybacking on the users' "reach."

Wages for Facebook is a cultural intervention—an attempt to unsettle what many of us have already come to accept as normal: the digitization of our subjectivities and relationships as nodes of production, and the correlative slide into self-promotion as a means of existence. When we accepted these services in the breathless spirit of technological utopianism, did we really know what we were agreeing to?

By working in an artistic mode, Ptak has been able to tap into something that allows others to imagine the real possibility of a Wages for Facebook campaign. There are already signs of movement: inspired in part by her work, a group of organizers launched an online campaign, Pay Me Facebook, in late January. Ptak has met with some of the members, still in the nascent stages of organizing, and they concluded that an actual campaign would require a shift away from the initial provocation. "I guess we're starting to ask the question together of what a digital justice movement might look like," said Ptak. "That's an interesting way to frame questions of labor, questions about privacy, questions about the environment, questions around the problematic statistics of gender—all of those kinds of things that technology brings up."

Their ideas have run the gamut from creating alternative social networks that function more like cooperatives (they are currently looking at an older form of online communication known as IRC channels) to arguing for a basic income. They are also interested in apps that could facilitate Facebook strikes or even permanent refusals, like the website Suicide Machine, which allows users to erase their social media presence. Other existing tools work in a similar vein, like Commodify Us, which allows users to upload their data and see how marketers might use it, and the plugin Not Not Like, which removes the "Like" button from Facebook. "The response makes me feel like I'm channeling what a lot of people are already thinking or feeling but haven't had the chance to articulate," said Ptak. "I'm hoping to really see how other people run with it."

In March, the Kadist Art Foundation will host Ptak and hold a discussion-based workshop in San Francisco, a city rapidly being reshaped by the tech industry's needs. In that context, the distinction between "the people who are getting paid for that labor and the people who are not getting paid for that labor is particularly pronounced," said Christina Linden, the curator for the event, who hopes "to bring the conversation near the center of where capital is being created."

Wages for Facebook points to a larger anxiety around digital media that is difficult to articulate. "It's about shifting our consciousness around what sort of agency we have in the face of our involvement with these networks and these companies," said Linden. "I think that's what I care the most about," said Ptak. "How do we have this conversation on a broad scale? And yeah, if people want to demand wages for Facebook, I'll be right there with them doing it."