

**Materializing *Six Years***  
**Lucy R. Lippard and**  
**the Emergence**  
**of Conceptual Art**

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The MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts,  
and London, England

Brooklyn Museum  
Brooklyn, New York

Still Relevant: Lucy R. Lippard,  
Feminist Activism, and  
Art Institutions

Julia Bryan-Wilson

## Still Relevant: Lucy R. Lippard, Feminist Activism, and Art Institutions

Julia Bryan-Wilson

### “Are Museums Relevant to Women?”

On December 12, 1971, twenty-nine speakers took the podium at a forum at the Brooklyn Museum to discuss the question, “Are museums relevant to women?” Co-chaired by the artist and activist Faith Ringgold and the writer Patricia Mainardi, the open meeting provided feminists within New York’s art world the opportunity to air grievances about gender discrimination in art institutions. Artists such as Alice Neel and Louise Bourgeois spoke about the need to pressure museums to include more female artists, as well as to dismantle the masculinist standards of quality in which art by women has historically been seen as of lesser value than art by men. In a summary of the event, Mainardi later wrote that the forum’s titular inquiry about museums and their “relevance” to women “brought a resounding ‘No!’ from virtually all the speakers.”<sup>1</sup> Art institutions—from bricks-and-mortar buildings themselves to the ideologies they uphold—were castigated for being outdated, sexist, and out of touch with the contemporary realities of feminist politics.

Avowed male allies Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche, founding members of the collective Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), stated: “... the structure of museums is a microcosm of the structure of sexism in our society. It is used to maintain, perpetuate and reinforce the myths, the mental attitudes, and the mechanics of male supremacy.”<sup>2</sup> GAAG’s statement highlights the palpable discontent regarding museums that was frequently articulated within activist circles of the New York art scene at this time. Museums were viewed as microcosms of all that was wrong with the broader culture, institutions where the massive discrepancies wrought by sexism, racism, and market capitalism could be found in their most potent forms. This notion was asserted in a similar gathering held a few years earlier, in 1969, by the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) and called “An Open Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Art Workers’ Coalition” (figure 37).<sup>3</sup> While speakers at the AWC event—the prototype for subsequent open hearings—discussed everything from museum deaccessioning policies to the Vietnam War, the Brooklyn Museum meeting was the first of its kind devoted exclusively to women’s issues.

The critic and curator Lucy R. Lippard was among the speakers in Brooklyn, and a photograph shows her in mid-gesture (figure 38). A flyer with the heading “Women and Art” was taped to the front of the podium. By 1971, Lippard was already famous for organizing high-profile exhibitions, for writing influential criticism, and for her prominent role within the Art Workers’ Coalition, in which she leveled wide-ranging critiques about interlocking systems of art, power, and money. Nevertheless, at the Brooklyn open hearing, she turned to the concrete difficulties she faced not only as an art worker, but specifically as a working mother:

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11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Circle 5-8900

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Name

**A.W.C.**

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**OPEN HEARING**

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Why can't museums have children's art education programs on Saturdays and Sundays where the kids can be left so that women, and couples too for that matter, can look at the work seriously without having to race around after a kid constantly? I haven't been to a museum in peace of mind for about seven years now. They're prejudiced against women in silly ways—like the Guggenheim won't let you take a stroller into the museum. If you've ever dragged a fifty-pound baby up and down the Guggenheim ramp, you know what that's about.<sup>4</sup>

In this speech, Lippard addressed the museum's relevance—or, more precisely, its irrelevance—to women as a matter of practical logistics, citing the lack of daycare, for instance, or advocating for better access for families with young children. These are just some of the matters of daily life that are structured by gender bias and the feminization of child rearing, and as such are connected to larger questions of injustice.



**FIGURE 37**

Cover of *An Open Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Art Workers' Coalition*. Staple-bound printed book, 11 x 8½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). New York: Art Workers' Coalition, 1969.

**FIGURE 38**

Jan van Raay (American, b. 1942). *Lippard at Brooklyn Museum of Art Hearing About Women's Art*, 1971. Black-and-white photograph. Collection of Jan van Raay, Portland, Ore. © Jan van Raay

With this critique, Lippard was not alone; Mainardi reported that one of the most frequently mentioned demands at the open hearing was “provisions for mothers to visit museums” (it was second only to the insistence that institutions purchase and show more art by women).<sup>5</sup> In fact, when a coalition of black women artists presented its list of six demands at the Brooklyn Museum hearing, number one was that museums launch an exhibition of black women’s art, and number two was that they “provide day-care centers or children’s workshops.”<sup>6</sup> Though the call for museums to develop daycare centers might seem to range far afield from debates about the systematic exclusion of women from museum exhibitions, for those at the Brooklyn Museum these requests were all of a piece. They were meant, in part, to increase the accessibility of art institutions to underserved populations. But even more radically, such demands underscored that neither the activity of art viewing nor the architecture in which it occurs (such as the Guggenheim ramp) are gender-neutral. If motherhood and spectating are not in fact distinct realms, Lippard suggested, then why shouldn’t the museum address them both on their own terms?

Beyond articulating a vision for an ideal museum, Lippard’s speech also indicates the pressures she felt in balancing her many forms of labor—some of which were not fully recognized as work. This dynamic is theorized in the writings of the French materialist feminist Christine Delphy from the early 1970s, which explicate the increasingly politicized notion of “women’s work” in public versus private modes of production.<sup>7</sup> Delphy maintains that so-called women’s work, such as child care or domestic maintenance, is often “excluded from the realm of value.”<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I examine how Lippard understood the shifting “relevance” of her own critical and curatorial practices alongside her roles as a feminist and as an activist.

### **Institutional Relevance**

Lippard had long been sympathetic to leftist causes, but as she has repeatedly said, she became “politicized” during a formative trip to Argentina in 1968, where she met some of the artists, workers, and journalists affiliated with the Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia (the Rosario Group).<sup>9</sup> The Rosario Group staged the interventionist event *Tucumán Arde* (*Tucumán Is Burning*), which was held at a local union hall and became a model for how to collectively protest current conditions (figure 39). After this trip, and seeing the possibilities for coalitional work in times of severe social crisis, Lippard immersed herself in on-the-street demonstrations, organizing, picketing, and other activities—as well as curating new types of exhibitions that were either explicitly or implicitly in dialogue with these politics. Her initial forays into activism in the late 1960s largely fell under the rubric of the AWC, a loosely organized body founded in 1969 as an artists’ rights group that became an important antiwar vehicle until its demise in 1971. In its brief lifespan, it challenged the very institutionalization of art: some of its members wanted to reform, if not dismantle, conventional museums, for-profit galleries, private dealers, art schools, art magazines, and the commodity nature of art itself—in short, to rethink or revolutionize the entire industry of contemporary art.

Lippard was at the forefront of such debates from early on in the formation of the AWC. At the AWC’s “Open Hearing” in 1969 she discussed the need for “a new and more flexible system that can adapt itself to the changes taking place today in the art itself.”<sup>10</sup> At a time when museums were being excoriated for their board members’ complicity with the military-industrial complex, the museums were nonetheless held up as a space of great promise, and as such were

FIGURE 39

Rosario Group. *Tucumán Arde* (*Tucumán Is Burning*)  
Publicity Campaign (2nd Step), 1968. Graffiti. Archivo  
Graciela Carnevale, Rosario, Argentina. © Grupo  
de Artistas de Vanguardia (Avant-Garde Artists Group).  
(Photo: Avant-Garde Artists Group)



13 DEMANDS

submitted to Mr. Bates Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art,  
by a group of artists and critics  
on January 28, 1969.

1. The Museum should hold a public hearing during February on the topic "The Museum's Relationship to Artists and to Society", which should conform to the recognized rules of procedure for public hearings.
2. A section of the Museum, under the direction of black artists, should be devoted to showing the accomplishments of black artists.
3. The Museum's activities should be extended into the Black, Spanish and other communities. It should also encourage exhibits with which these groups can identify.
4. A committee of artists with curatorial responsibilities should be set up annually to arrange exhibits.
5. The Museum should be open on two evenings until midnight and admission should be free at all times.
6. Artists should be paid a rental fee for the exhibition of their works.
7. The Museum should recognize an artist's right to refuse showing a work owned by the Museum in any exhibition other than one of the Museum's permanent collection.
8. The Museum should declare its position on copyright legislation and the proposed arts proceeds act. It should also take active steps to inform artists of their legal rights.
9. A registry of artists should be instituted at the Museum. Artists who wish to be registered should supply the Museum with documentation of their work, in the form of photographs, news clippings, etc., and this material should be added to the existing artists' files.
10. The Museum should exhibit experimental works requiring unique environmental conditions at locations outside the Museum.
11. A section of the Museum should be permanently devoted to showing the works of artists without galleries.
12. The Museum should include among its staff persons qualified to handle the installation and maintenance of technological works.
13. The Museum should appoint a responsible person to handle any grievances arising from its dealings with artists.

13

**FIGURE 40**

**Art Workers' Coalition. 13 Demands, January 28, 1969. Memo submitted to Bates Lowry, director of The Museum of Modern Art, addressing artists' rights at the museum. Typewritten text, 11 x 8½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). Virginia Admiral Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.**



places of enormous investment for artists and critics like Lippard. (Such contradiction—and an underlying naïveté—would ultimately make the AWC untenable.) In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the AWC persistently asked much of museums, looking at them as laboratories where collective agitation might cultivate something more socially just. They issued a list of thirteen demands to modern art museums—in particular, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, a frequent target of their protests (figure 40). Among the sweeping changes called for, here and in other lists of demands, were provisions related to more artists’ input, as well as more equity along lines of class, race, and gender: having a board of trustees comprised one-third of artists, insisting that “admission should be free at all times,” “extend[ing] its activities into the Black, Spanish, and all other communities,” and “establishing equal representation of the sexes in shows, museum purchases, and on selection committees.”

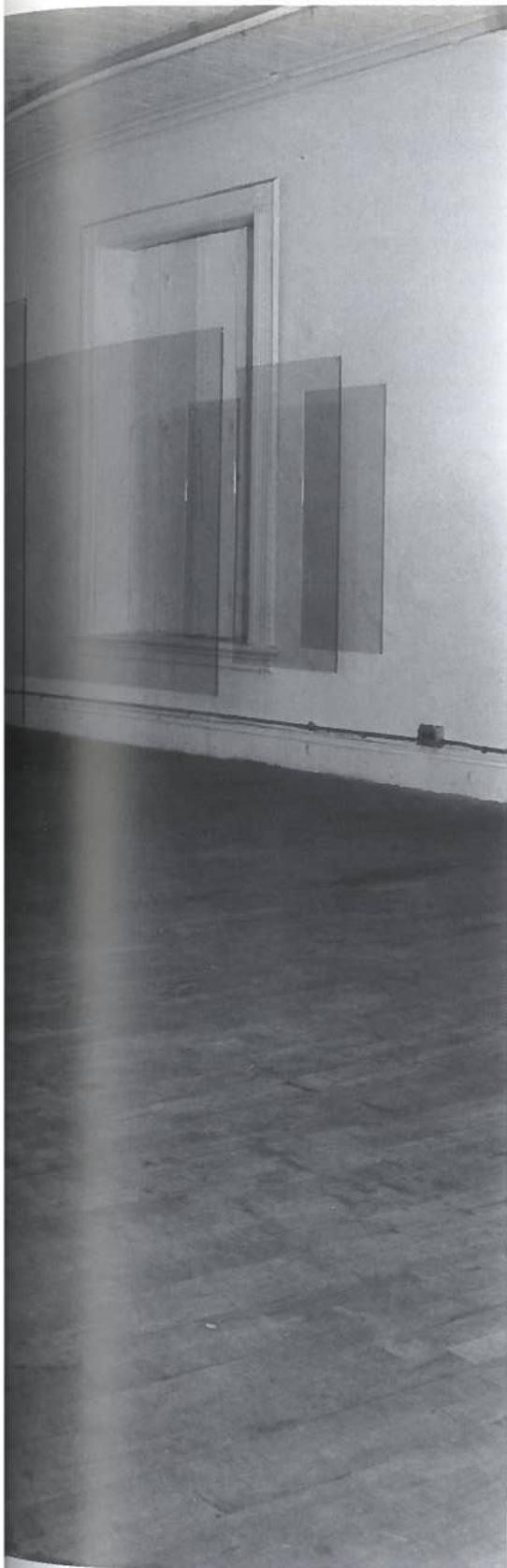
The AWC was also affected by wider anti-Vietnam War sentiment and called for museums to take public stands against the war, including asking MoMA to co-sponsor the production of their protest poster *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* (figure 35). The museum initially agreed to this co-sponsorship, but later backed out, demurring that it preferred to remain “neutral”—though Lippard and others were quick to point out that with Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller (who supported the war in Vietnam) on its board, it could hardly be so.<sup>11</sup>

The Coalition became increasingly disheartened with art institutions and looked to other avenues of display and dissemination that might circumvent traditional museums altogether. What this effort should look like was far from clear, but Lippard embraced process art and Conceptualism as ways to resist the entrenched channels of promotion and commodity exchange. For her, the text-based nature of “dematerialized” art, with its index cards, instructions, advertisements, and blank pages, could defy the logic of the artwork as an object to be bought and sold. In some of her critical writings beginning in 1968, as well as in Conceptual exhibitions she curated, such as *557,087* from 1969, she became an avid proponent of the (to her, inherently) political nature of such artworks.

She also pushed this thesis in curatorial work that was overtly related to her activism, as in the exhibition she co-organized with Robert Huot and Ron Wolin that linked Minimal aesthetics to an antiwar stance. This show, launched at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1968 as a benefit for the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, included works by Jo Baer and Carl Andre, along with Sol LeWitt’s first wall drawing, which was painted over when the show closed and whose price was based on the number of hours it would take the artist to re-create it (figure 41). This was one model that the New York art left had for art that was deemed “relevant”: an exhibition of art where the sales profits are clearly demarcated for an activist cause. Yet Lippard also felt that the formal aesthetics of the works in the show made a “forceful statement for peace,” according to the press release (though at least one critic questioned this premise and thought it sounded rather like self-justification).<sup>12</sup>

Along with many in the AWC, such as Hans Haacke, Lippard began to focus on activism within and against museums, actions that to a large degree instigated the development of what came to be called institutional critique. As Lippard’s protest actions started to overlap with and reshape her critical and curatorial agendas, she struggled with the contentious issue of relevance, writing in 1970: “... we are all too aware that art itself is ‘irrelevant’; when compared to the world of slums, wars, prisons, the art world is a bed of roses. At the same time art is what we do or a focus of what we do.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the term *relevance* in the late 1960s and early



**FIGURE 41**

Installation view of *Benefit for the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam* including Sol LeWitt's first wall drawing (back wall); Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, October 22–31, 1968; co-organized by Lucy R. Lippard, Robert Huot, and Ron Wolin. © Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. (Photo: James Dee, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

1970s functioned as shorthand for wider anxieties about the waning influence of art in a time of enormous social upheaval.

This emphasis on relevance is further evidenced by other documents from the time, such as Faith Ringgold's statement read at *The People's Flag Show* in 1970: "Theatre, cinema, literature, music, TV, dance, all of the arts and all of life is trying (feebly in most instances), but [as] they begin to know the word *relevance* they begin to politicize, to revolutionize their art, to embrace the people in the street"<sup>14</sup> (emphasis in original). For Ringgold, relevance in art is explicitly linked to revolutionary politics, particularly ones that reach out beyond the usual audiences for art to "the people in the street." Along with GAAG's Hendricks and Toche, Ringgold was arrested for her participation in this exhibition, which included a performance in which GAAG burned an American flag. Ringgold's idea of a "relevant" art that touches the people in the street, however, stands at some distance from Lippard's understanding of the relevance of LeWitt's geometric penciled lines on a wall. The tension between them suggests some of the serious, unresolved paradoxes that haunted the Art Workers' Coalition from the outset and contributed to its collapse: should art strive to be populist, or should it remain autonomous? Should artists make propaganda, should they produce formal experiments, or should they stop making art altogether?

Artists and critics such as Ringgold and Lippard, however differently, worried not only that museums were slipping from their role as vital spaces of cultural exchange into the realm of the unnecessary or frivolous, but that art itself as a form of production might also lack any crucial purpose, demoted to entertainment or decoration. Hilton Kramer dissected the problem in a *New York Times* article titled "Artists and the Problem of 'Relevance,'" in 1969, in which he asserted that despite the current political unrest in the U.S. (arising not least from the bloody war abroad), "artists and art institutions have tended to play a negligible role—if, indeed, any role at all."<sup>15</sup> Kramer saw the organization of the Art Workers' Coalition as an attempt by artists to reassert their potential "place on the cultural scene ... [and] ability to function as a cultural force," primarily by rethinking the system by which art is produced and consumed.

*Relevance* is of course a relative term. Its dictionary definition, "having a direct bearing on the matter at hand," begs the question: what, then, is the matter at hand? One might say that for self-described art workers like Lippard, the word *relevance* meant political relevance, some sort of calibration toward the social unrest of the moment, such as civil rights, feminism, and antiwar agitation. According to this logic, in order to signal its relevance, the museum should not only uphold a mission of public service (thus providing child education classes to benefit working mothers, for example), but also align itself, pointedly, legibly, and even practically, with the concerns of the left. How this might be accomplished was never fully formulated.

### **Feminist Activism**

Starting in 1970—the year that she began to identify herself as a feminist—Lippard's involvement with the women's movement increasingly affected her writing and curating, and even more powerfully altered the course of her career than did her affiliation with the Art Workers' Coalition (where, despite her critical influence, she still struggled to make herself heard as a woman). As mentioned earlier, she claimed Minimalism as political when she co-curated the benefit show for the Student Mobilization Committee in 1968, and the curatorial stance she took in her Conceptual shows also indicated her interest in linking dematerialized art with leftist

ideals. However, her inauguration into the women's movement exposed her to new kinds of art, including craft-based work, and led her to champion different kinds of artists, as is chronicled in her collection *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (1976).<sup>16</sup> By embracing women's art that was further marginalized for its use of traditionally "female" techniques, Lippard attacked gendered assumptions about high-art standards (standards that rely upon a debasing of low materials such as handiwork) and raised questions about the radical disparity of opportunities between men and women artists.

Leading the charge to address gender discrimination in the art world was Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), an offshoot of the Art Workers' Coalition that came together in late 1969. Though the AWC's demands had included a measure about women artists, many women who had long felt the sting of sexism felt that this was merely lip service and wanted more concrete results. On December 23, 1969, WAR held a meeting with staff at MoMA to demand non-juried shows and to call for an end to suffocating—and gendered—definitions of what was legitimized as museum-worthy fine art. But such meetings were inevitably frustrating, especially since women had busy lives to lead. As Lippard later said:

Most of us, especially the women, were working full time trying to make art on the side, trying to raise children, trying to be lovers, and so on, plus all this political activity. So the Modern [MoMA] used to drag us into these long, long talks about everything and just went on and on and on. They were being paid salaries to talk to us and we were tearing our hair, you know, losing time, money, and our minds.<sup>17</sup>

Since talking with museums went nowhere, they started to focus their energies on direct action. The Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee was formed in 1970 to encompass members from WAR, the AWC, and Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL, which consisted, basically, of Ringgold and her daughters Michele and Barbara Wallace). It was organized specifically to lobby the Whitney Painting and Sculpture Annual (the precursor to today's prestigious Biennial), in which women artists were notoriously scarce. Over the course of four months, the Ad Hoc Committee—with Lippard front and center—protested every Saturday, blowing police whistles, wearing red armbands, leaving unused tampons and eggs in the museum stairwells, and picketing outside the front door with signs demanding that the exhibition be 50 percent women artists.<sup>18</sup> They got creative with their tactics, including printing fake tickets for the opening and forging a press release (on smuggled Whitney Museum letterhead) that announced that half of the artists in the exhibition would indeed be women, with a proportional percentage of black, Asian, and Puerto Rican artists. This move was especially ingenious, as it forced the director of the museum, John I. H. Baur, to issue a counterstatement: "URGENT: TO ALL EDITORS. Press release mailed to you, dated 11-9-70, purporting to be from the Whitney Museum of American Art, headlined 'Whitney Sculpture Annual to be 50% Women' is a complete forgery—repeat a forgery. Facts are totally untrue."<sup>19</sup> Though this statement almost comically reasserts the museum's disregard for gender parity, the Ad Hoc Committee's actions did have a measurable impact: the number of women increased from 4.5 percent to 22 percent in one year.

Importantly, these feminist actions were not limited to changing art-world statistics, but branched out into women's issues that spanned a range of concerns. One of WAR's first major organizing initiatives focused on women's reproductive health, and its members made posters

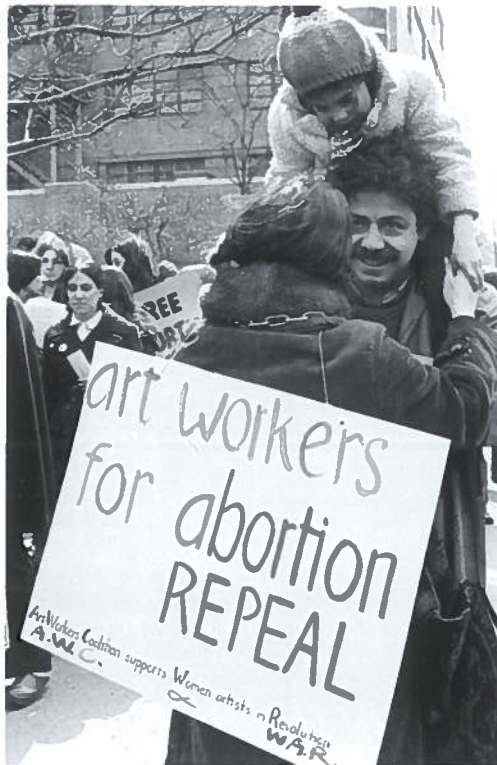
and aprons for an abortion-rights demonstration in March 1970.<sup>20</sup> This march, which occurred before the legalization of abortion in 1973, included male members of the Art Workers' Coalition who came out to support the cause (figure 42). In the photograph shown here, WAR member and sculptor Muriel Castanis, with her husband and child, bears a pro-choice sign that reads "Art Workers for Abortion Repeal." This image demonstrates that the loose and often vexed term *art worker* was marshaled at the time as a politically coherent identity, in the same way that one might go to a rally holding a sign, such as "TEACHERS FOR PEACE" or "MOMS AGAINST THE WAR," to indicate a kind of employment or demographic status. One fantasy of such identifications is that, when mobilized en masse, all members of this self-described group can speak with a significant collective voice. Though today the term *art worker* might seem to embody a grave contradiction, given the presumed class and privilege differences between artists and those conventionally understood as "workers," circa 1970 it had real purchase, however unstable and paradoxical. (The term has recently been revived; an organization founded in 2008, Working Artists and the Greater Economy, or WAGE, borrows some of the same terminology as the AWC, though WAGE has not sought to make connections with non-art social movements as the AWC and WAR had.)

The issue of the "relevance" of museums—and art itself—was central to the formation of the AWC, and it continued to percolate throughout diverse feminist actions in the early 1970s. Many at the Brooklyn Museum open hearing in 1971 wondered if museums were "relevant to anyone at all," or if they might already be "obsolete"—and not only for white women.<sup>21</sup> Artists of color increasingly sounded this query; for instance, the question of relevance appeared at a 1971 demonstration organized by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition at the Whitney Museum of American Art to protest its exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, curated by Robert Doty, a white man. Among the many signs carried by the protestors is one held by BECC co-founder Benny Andrews's child that reads: "... IS THE WHITNEY RELEVANT?????" (figure 43). The answer, presumably, is negative, and next to this question is a hand-drawn image of a black man raising the power-to-the-people fist; it is unclear if the figure is mouthing the words, or stands as a symbolic rebuttal—as if to say *this*, this defiant man, is what is relevant. In the wake of growing consciousness about women's issues, concerns about gender discrimination were also integral to this protest, as is evident in Michele Wallace's holding a stenciled sign demanding "50% Black Women Artists" (figure 44). Others at this rally included Lippard, who appears in a different photograph with the same sign as Wallace.

In accordance with her feminist activism, in the early 1970s Lippard started more aggressively to discuss her antipathy toward the critical policing of what was known in shorthand as "quality," which had become a flashpoint in feminist discussions of art. If women were not represented equally in museums, so the conventional story went, it was because their work was simply not strong enough, simply could not hold its own against art made by men. Linda Nochlin's classic feminist essay from 1971, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," argues that "greatness," far from denoting innate genius, is a highly constructed, policed, and gendered category. As Nochlin writes, "the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast."<sup>22</sup> Feminists grew wary of curators

**FIGURE 42**

Jan van Raay (American, b. 1942). *Art Workers for Abortion Repeal, Muriel Castanis Wearing Sign, with Her Husband and Daughter*, 1971. Black-and-white photograph. Collection of Jan van Raay, Portland, Ore. © Jan van Raay



**FIGURE 43**

Jan van Raay (American, b. 1942). *Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) Protest at the Whitney Museum, 1971*. Black-and-white photograph. Collection of Jan van Raay, Portland, Ore. © Jan van Raay



**FIGURE 44**

Jan van Raay (American, b. 1942). *Michele Wallace Carrying Sign About 50% Black Women Artists, 1971*. Black-and-white photograph. Collection of Jan van Raay, Portland, Ore. © Jan van Raay





saying that they did not give women solo shows because they were interested only in the “quality” of the work—an ostensibly sex-blind category that invariably favored male artists.

Taste, of course, is never neutral, and the idea of “quality” was, for many feminists, little more than an alibi or an excuse for discrimination, one that encapsulates many levels of gender-biased gate-keeping that shut out women artists, especially as some were beginning to integrate “low” forms such as crafts into their work. Lippard later recognized “the seed of feminism in my revolt against Clement Greenberg’s patronization of artists, against the imposition of the taste of one class on everybody.”<sup>23</sup> Louise Bourgeois stated it most polemically at a women’s protest at the Whitney in 1970: “the question of quality should be suspended for the time being.”<sup>24</sup> Lippard began to look at a wide range of women’s art—“anything by women, which brought me back towards painting and sculpture.”<sup>25</sup> She chose her subjects based on affinities and allegiances, many of which stemmed from her commitment to women artists, writing about untested figures, political propagandists, emerging artists, and other risk takers whose work she felt drawn to for any number of reasons.

Alongside this reorientation of her critical practice toward female artists, Lippard’s somewhat belated entry into feminism also shed new light on her curatorial work. Though she had long included women in her exhibitions, she started to see the urgency of putting on all-women shows. In 1971, she organized a show at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, of women who had never had one-person exhibitions in New York; titled *Twenty-Six Contemporary Women Artists*, it was the first of its kind in the area. Lippard has always had a keen eye, and this astonishing show featured many women now considered central to twentieth-century art, including Alice Aycock, Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, Christine Kozlov, Mary Miss, Sylvia Mangold, and Adrian Piper. This was just the beginning of Lippard’s groundbreaking decision to create women-only exhibitions, such as her historic show, titled *c. 7,500*, of female Conceptual artists, which originated in Valencia, California.<sup>26</sup>

### **Six Years in Retrospect**

Given the intensity of political action that Lippard was involved in, it is surprising that her major chronicle of exactly this era—*Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*<sup>27</sup>—appears to record only scant details about the larger turmoil or the connections many were making between activism and art. The book makes no pretense of inclusivity or comprehensiveness, though it offers up a wealth of bibliographical and exhibition information, review snippets, photographic documentation, and interview excerpts. It makes for a lively mix, and Lippard was certainly far too modest when she said, in the Preface to the first edition, that “I am probably safe in saying, as I have of some exhibitions I have organized, that no one but me (and my editors) will read the whole book through.”<sup>28</sup>

In fact, *Six Years* is a peculiar document on several fronts (for instance, it is unexpected to read in the acknowledgments that Carl Andre compiled the index), not least with regard to the “occasional political overtones” mentioned in the book’s extended subtitle: as Lippard notes, they are more like “undertones.”<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that mentions of contemporary political events don’t exist (they do). For the record, and to be overly mechanistic, the first reference to war occurs in the book’s eighth entry: a speech given in 1966 by Yoko Ono (who is also the first woman to make an appearance) that mentions “the time of the Second World War, when we had no food to eat.”<sup>30</sup> The important organization Students for a Democratic Society is summoned

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April 29, 1971.

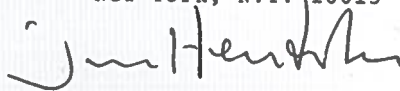
To: RICHARD M. NIXON,  
President of the United States of America,  
The White House,  
Washington, D.C.

Guerrilla Art Action, to be performed every day,  
from May 1 through May 6, 1971 by Richard M. Nixon,  
President of the United States of America:

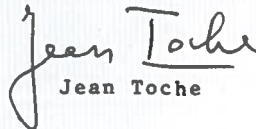
E A T   W H A T   Y O U   K I L L

GUERRILLA ART ACTION GROUP

No 1 White Street  
New York, N.Y. 10013



Jon Hendricks



Jean Toche

**FIGURE 45**

Guerrilla Art Action Group (Jon Hendricks [American, b. 1939] and Jean Toche [American, b. Belgium 1932]). *Send Letters to Nixon, Agnew, Hoover, Mitchell, Laird, Kissinger ... April 29, New York (Eat What You Kill)*, 1971. Typewritten letter, 11 x 8½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). Collection of Alan Cravitz, Chicago

early on by Joseph Beuys, who dismisses it completely: "A rabbit running from one 'Fat Corner' [a sculpture by Beuys] to the next can do more for mankind than the SDS, which deals with Marxist thoughts without understanding them."<sup>31</sup> Arrogantly trumpeting his version of criticality, Beuys voices none of the anxieties about relevance seen in Lippard's writings.

The Vietnam War appears first on page 24, in an entry about the French artists Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, and Toroni, who issued the following declaration on June 2, 1967: "Inasmuch as to paint is a function of estheticism, flowers, women, eroticism, the daily environment, art, dada, psychoanalysis, the war in Vietnam, WE ARE NOT PAINTERS." The term *peace* shows up once, in relation to LeWitt's wall drawing at the *Art for Peace* benefit show,<sup>32</sup> and the Art Workers' Coalition appears only in a passage about its protest of the cancellation of Hans Haacke's solo show at the Guggenheim in 1971.<sup>33</sup> Finally, *Six Years* includes a description of GAAG's 1971 missive to President Nixon: "EAT WHAT YOU KILL" (figure 45), an example of letter writing as a form of Conceptual art.<sup>34</sup>

Still, there is no mention of the AWC or its activities in 1969 or 1970, though some of them arguably had a direct bearing on the formation of Conceptualism and institutional critique, and likewise, there is nothing on organizations such as Women Artists in Revolution, the Ad Hoc Committee, or the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (there is a striking paucity of African American work in the book). Though Lippard was immersed in feminist activities during the time she was editing *Six Years* from her massive storehouse of material, very little of that registers within its pages, even though actions like the forged Whitney press release could certainly count as Conceptually based art, as much as GAAG's letters to Nixon do. However, it is misleading to try to chronicle all the literal appearances of ostensibly "political" actions within *Six Years*, for Lippard's underlying premise was that Conceptualism itself formed part of a nascent alternative network that could, conceivably, remake the art world. In her view, the very act of, say, sending letters as art—regardless of content—was potentially political.

Though the book has come to seem indispensable, the early reviews of *Six Years* were decidedly mixed, with some dismissing Lippard's intellectual labor as an act of rote compiling. Not so: she made major organizational and editorial decisions, and wrote short passages that function as connective tissue and interject her own theories and opinions. In a few cases, she took out the more polemical material—for instance, among the many draft pages of *Six Years* in Lippard's papers at the Archives of American Art is one with a passage by Haacke crossed out (figure 46). This passage, in a letter written by Haacke in 1968 to Jack Burnham, speaks directly to the thorny issue, again, of "relevance": "The murder of Martin Luther King pressed into focus something that I had known for a long time but never realized so bitterly and helplessly—namely, what we are doing: the production and the talk about sculpture has nothing to do with the urgent problems of our society.... All the shows of Angry Arts will not prevent a single Napalm bomb from being dropped. We must face the fact that art is unsuited as a political tool." It is impossible to reconstruct why Lippard excised this negative assessment, though perhaps it may have seemed too jarring, within the generally more optimistic tone of the book as a whole. In addition, Haacke appears to have changed his mind not long after, given his turn toward institutional critique and overtly critical art circa 1970 (in concert with his activism in the AWC); she might not have wanted to represent outdated views.

Much has been made about the failures of this moment and the collapse of its utopian dreams, including by Lippard herself. In the Postface to *Six Years*, she admits: "Hopes that

entire article may be viewed as a variation of that much misused remark; or as a monstrous 'museum' constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects within a single building of words -- a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc. Or language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere. "

De France, James, "Some New Los Angeles Artists: Barry Le Va", Artforum, March 1968. REP.

No.1,

Straight, School of Visual Arts, New York, April 1968; edited by Joseph Kosuth with ("Editorial in 27 Parts") with text on rock music by Dan Graham.

Bochner, Mel, "A compilation for Robert Mangold", Art International, April, 1968. Entire article consists of a series of quotations from other artists and writers that apply to Mangold's work.

April 27, Paris: Daniel Buren's "Proposition Didactique" presented inside the Salon de Mai (striped floor to ceiling, two walls) and outside (two men with striped sandwich boards for one full day, and striped billboards found in over 200 locations around the city). See Robho No.4, 1968 for an account.

"Eye liners and some leaves from Barry Flanagan's Notebook", Art and Artist, April 1968.

April 10, 1968; Haacke letter to J. Burnham ~~from Hans Haacke~~

"The murder of Martin Luther King pressed into focus something that I had known for a long time but never realized so bitterly and helplessly -- namely what we are doing: the production and the talk about sculpture has nothing to do with the urgent problems of our society. whoever believes that art can make life more humane is utterly naive. Mondrian was one of those naive saints...Nothing, but absolutely nothing, is changed by whatever type of painting, or sculpture, or happening you produce. All the shows of angry Arts will not prevent a single Napalm bomb from being dropped. We must face the fact that art is unguilted as a political tool."

Hutchinson, Peter, "Perception of Illusion: Object and Environment", Arts, April 1968.

Morris, Robert, "Anti-Form", Artforum, April 1968. "The process of 'making itself' has hardly been examined...Of the Abstract Expressionists only Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as

FIGURE 46

Lucy R. Lippard (American, b. 1937). Manuscript of entries subsequently printed on page 45 of *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, c. 1972. Photocopy with handwritten ink markings, 11 x 8½ in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

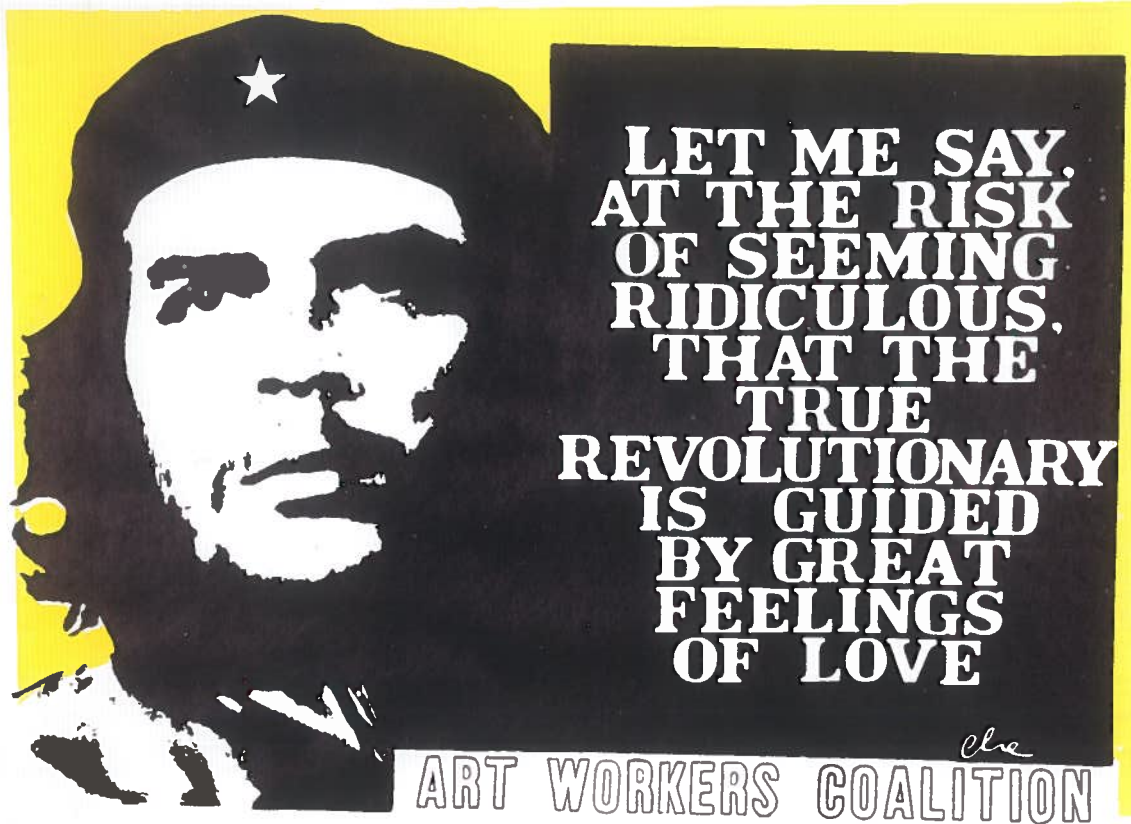
'conceptual art' would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively 'progressive' approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded."<sup>35</sup> In an article on entrenched class bias in the art world published in 1977 in the feminist art magazine *Heresies* (Lippard was a co-founder of the collective), she elaborated:

Conceptual Art's democratic efforts and physical vehicles were canceled out by its neutral, elitist content and its patronizing approach. From around 1967 to 1971, many of us involved in Conceptual Art saw that content as pretty revolutionary and thought of ourselves as rebels against the cool, hostile artifacts of the prevailing formalist and Minimalist art. But we were so totally enveloped in the middle-class approach to everything we did and saw, we couldn't perceive how that pseudo-academic narrative piece or that art-world-oriented action in the streets were deprived of any revolutionary content by the fact that it was usually incomprehensible and alienating to the people "out there," no matter how fashionably downwardly mobile it might be in the art world.<sup>36</sup>

It is a hallmark of Lippard's brilliance that she is able to admit when she might have been wrong. Her willingness to be flexible, to be self-critical, and to change course are part of what makes her writing so necessary. She has faced brutal critiques and dismissals—many of them overtly sexist—yet she consistently pursues what is important to her. Lippard was a pioneer in many respects, but one of her most significant contributions to postwar art is her self-aware, self-reflective critical writing. She was at the forefront of Conceptualism and feminism (and, later, activist art and environmental issues), to be sure, but she has also redefined what we think of as an engaged curator and critic: someone unafraid to be skeptical and anti-institutional, someone with strongly held beliefs, motivated not by market demands but by a deep passion for art and an unparalleled respect for artists. Along with her productive refusals and protests, Lippard also modeled acceptance and embrace—she championed the artists she respected, she advocated for causes, and she argued *for* as much as she agitated *against*.

That is to say, the greatest lesson Lippard offers is that criticism, as well as activism, might draw on love as well as anger. The most frequently reprinted poster made by the Art Workers' Coalition is the one of massacred villagers in Vietnam (figure 35); but there is also one, much less widely shown, that quotes Che Guevara: "Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love" (figure 47). Lippard has consistently risked "seeming ridiculous," and in so doing has made room for an activist brand of writing and curating that has changed the face of the art institution as we know it.

In 2010, a panel was held at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art on the topic "Invisibility to Visibility: Are Museums Opening Up to Women?" This question asks if museums are becoming more welcoming to women as artists and as spectators, and appears to echo the Brooklyn open hearing "Are Museums Relevant to Women?" held almost thirty years prior. But the 1971 query had a different tone than one of number counting: it asked, do museums *matter* to women, to their art as well as to their lives and their politics? Are they meaningful places for critical dialogue; are they responsive to current debates; are they vibrant spaces for culture? In the early 1970s, feminists answered no—and in response, they started their own alternative organizations and pushed museums to address issues of discrimination. The persistence of gender inequality today (and the depressing need to keep asking if museums are "opening up to women") demonstrates that in some respects, art institutions have not come very far since 1971.

**FIGURE 47**

Artists' Poster Committee of the Art Workers' Coalition. *Let Me Say, at the Risk of Seeming Ridiculous, That the True Revolutionary Is Guided by Great Feelings of Love*, c. 1971. Offset poster, 15½ x 21<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (39.4 x 53.8 cm). International Center of Photography, New York; Gift of the Artists' Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2002. Designed by Ursula Meyer. © Art Workers' Coalition. (Photo: International Center of Photography, New York)

At the same time, however, the very existence of the Sackler Center, which opened in 2007, signals a shift, a shift that Lippard herself helped instigate as she insisted upon the centrality of feminism within art, and of the centrality of art within feminism. That an exhibition on *Six Years* and Lippard's influence is being launched at the very place where she loudly enumerated the many ways museums discriminate against women indicates more than simply coming full circle. Lippard's unique blend of activist and critical commitments has proven to be not just relevant, but essential.

## Notes

1. Pat Mainardi, "Open Hearing at Brooklyn Museum," *The Feminist Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), p. 6.
2. Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche, "Open Hearing at the Brooklyn Museum: 'Are Museums Relevant to Women?,' Guerrilla Art Action Group Testimony," no. 28 (December 12, 1971); reprinted in *GAAG: The Guerrilla Art Action Group, 1969–1976: A Selection* (New York: Printed Matter, 1978), unpaginated.
3. For more on this hearing, and for an examination of shifting notions of artistic labor in this time, see my *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
4. Quoted in Mainardi, "Open Hearing at Brooklyn Museum," p. 6. Alongside full-length statements by Ann Sutherland Harris and Cindy Nemser, Mainardi's summary included other brief excerpts from speeches delivered at the open hearing.
5. Ibid.
6. Kay Brown, "'Where We At': Black Women Artists," *The Feminist Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), p. 25.
7. Christine Delphy's writings were collected in English in her *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*, ed. and trans. Diana Leonard (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
8. Christine Delphy, "The Main Enemy" (1970), reprinted in *Close to Home*, p. 60.
9. See, for example, *Get the Message?: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), p. 2.
10. AWC, *An Open Hearing* (New York: Art Workers' Coalition, 1969).
11. For more on this incident, see Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
12. Gregory Battcock, "Art: Reviewing the Above Statement," *Free Press Critique*, no. 31 (October 1968), p. B1.
13. Lucy R. Lippard, "The Dilemma," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 45, no. 2 (November 1970), p. 28.
14. Faith Ringgold, "Black Women Art Is Political," typewritten speech delivered at the opening of *The People's Flag Show*, Judson Memorial Church, New York (December 9, 1970); Judson Memorial Church Archives, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.
15. Hilton Kramer, "Artists and the Problem of 'Relevance,'" *New York Times*, May 4, 1969, p. D23.
16. Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).
17. Ibid, p. 4.
18. See Therese Schwartz, "50%—No Joke," *New York Element*, vol. 2, no. 3 (November—December 1970); reprinted in Jacqueline Skiles and Janet McDevitt, eds., *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution* (New York: Women Artists in Revolution, 1971), p. 29.
19. John I. H. Baur, press release, November 11, 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives.

20. Juliette Gordon, "The History of Our WAR from the Beginnings to Today or Life under Fire in the Art World Dear Workers," *Manhattan Tribune*, May 2, 1970; reprinted in *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution*, p. 4.
21. Mainardi, "Open Hearing at Brooklyn Museum," p. 6.
22. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Art News* (January 1971); reprinted in her *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 158.
23. Lucy R. Lippard, "Changing since *Changing*," in her *From the Center*, p. 3.
24. Quoted in Grace Glueck, "Women Artists Demonstrate at the Whitney," *New York Times*, December 12, 1970, p. 19.
25. Lucy R. Lippard, videotaped interview by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield (1979) for "On Art and Artists: Video Data Bank," unedited transcript, p. 8; Lucy R. Lippard Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
26. For more on this show, see Cornelia Butler's study of c. 7,500, in Pablo Lafuente, ed., *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard's Numbers Shows, 1969–74* (London: Afterall Books, forthcoming in 2012).
27. *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones), edited and annotated by Lucy R. Lippard* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973; reprinted, with a new introduction, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
28. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
29. Lucy R. Lippard, "Preface: *Six Years* ... Forty Years Later," in the present volume.
30. Yoko Ono, "To the Wesleyan People (who attended the meeting): a footnote to my lecture of January 13th, 1966" (January 23, 1966); excerpts printed in Lippard, *Six Years*, p. 13.
31. Quoted in Lippard, *Six Years*, p. 19.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 227–29.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–36.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
36. Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World," *Heresies*, no. 1 (January 1977); reprinted in Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 121–22.