
TIME CAPSULE

LUCY R. LIPPARD

*The function of the radical is sacrificial. The radical proposes ideas that cause destruction and later become orthodoxies.*¹

E.L. Doctorow

The mythology of the 1960s lives today, and for good reason. To begin with this is a disillusioned Western society that craves hope and optimism at both ends of the political spectrum. Even when the media fog is cleared away, the exhilarating and finally tragic substance of that decade – the dashed hopes of revolution, of equality, of social justice – though now threatened by cultural amnesia, will remain important until an equally widespread social upheaval comes about for activist artists no less than for others. Encapsulating the 60s has never been an easy job. My image of the times – garnered primarily from New York and my own lived experiences there – is a tangled thicket of multicoloured threads with elusive origins.

‘Social change’ itself has many definitions within the arts. I will focus here on activist or ‘oppositional’ art, because the United States’ false claims and dangerous acts in the ‘war on terror’ and the consequent drain of constitutional rights has many of us in the mood to act, to recall and to analyse previous actions.² However, I suspect that the greatest legacy of the 1960s (which took place in ensuing decades) is the ‘community-based’ arts, otherwise known as ‘interventionist’ or ‘dialogic art’, which has more quietly contributed to social change since the 60s. An astounding array of work has been produced with every imaginable ‘community’ (ie. marginalised or disenfranchised groups). Suzanne Lacy alone has made a long series of visually striking public performances aimed at change in social policy, based on years of work with poor women, elderly women, homeless women, incarcerated women, cancer victims, teenagers, cops... and more.

¹ E.L. Doctorow quoted in L. Lippard, ‘Notes on the Independence Movement’, in Janet Kardon, (ed.), *1967: At the Crossroads*, Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1987.

² For me, the most thorough book on art in 1960s New York is by an Englishman; see Francis Frascina, *Art,*

Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America, Manchester University Press, 1999. It provides a detailed and analytic account of most of the events mentioned here. See also L. Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*, Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1990; and for the broadest

picture, Julie Ault, *Alternative Art*, New York, 1965–1985, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Art inspired by social energies – including community murals and gardens, works embedded in urban planning, education and social policy – is today more organised, better funded, less funky than it was in the 1960s. Sometimes these forms are framed as art, sometimes not, but that is another story, demanding an entire essay of its own.³ Whereas community-based art is grounded in communication and exchange, activist art is based on creative dissent and confrontation. Community-based arts tend to be affirmative while most ‘political art’ is rejective of the status quo.⁴ Although this trend has developed primarily since the 1960s, its roots lie in the Utopian countercultural values of that fertile decade, with its ongoing challenges to the ‘privatisation’ of art that ruled in the 1950s and was on the throne again by the 1980s. As attorney Amy Adler has remarked, ‘there is a history of suppressing and controlling what people see, based on elitist fears of mass access’.⁵

My generation of American artists (born between the late 1920s and the mid 1940s) was abysmally ignorant of the socio-political art that existed before World War II, which had been erased from the histories we learned in school. In the economically triumphant and politically fearful McCarthyite 1950s, we were cut off from any notion that art could be related to politics, unless we were red-diaper babies. Formalism reigned. Everything was universalised. (Who knew that *Guernica* was painted by a communist? That it was an outcry not against war in general but against a specific fascist attack?) So, when artists were sparked into action by the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War or the Women’s Liberation movement, they were forced to reinvent the wheel, a state of affairs that continues, to a lesser extent, today.

Contemporary artists’ commitment to social change waxes and wanes unpredictably. Sometimes the impetus is obvious, such as the international movement against the war on Vietnam. Sometimes a similar impetus, such as the war on Iraq, has less effect than might be expected. While artists are never the vanguard of political movements, once they are swept into action they can be valuable allies. In the United States few seem to believe this, despite the fact that elsewhere poets, artists and popular musicians are early targets of repressive regimes that know how powerful the arts can be. Even on the Left, where most activist art comes from, there is a tendency to dismiss its effectiveness, to consider the arts as window dressing, useful only for fund-raising. In a sense this is true; art often reflects rather than

3 On the topic of community-based arts and cultural democracy, see Eva Cockcroft, John Weber and James Cockcroft, *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977; Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Crossroads: Reflections on the Politics of Culture*, Talmage, CA: DNA Press, 1990; Suzanne Lacy (ed.),

Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995; Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (eds.), *Cultures in Contention*, Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985; Mark O’Brien and Craig Little (eds.), *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990; and Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland (eds.), *The Citizen Artist*: 20

Years of Art in the Public Arena, Gardner NY: The Critical Press, 1998.

4 See J. Kardon (ed.), *op. cit.* (with essays by Hal Foster, Lucy R. Lippard, Barbara Rose, Janet Kardon and Irving Sandler).

5 Amy Adler, ‘Age of Innocence’, *frieze*, January 1996, no.34; quoted by F. Frascina, p.219.

leads social agendas. Most images may not be ‘worth 1000 words’ but sometimes they can operate parallel to rhetorical texts and dense information barrages, providing jolts to embedded opinions. Art is the wildcard in many a fixed game. Witness the ‘Culture Wars’, begun in the late 1980s, which have not yet subsided.⁶ Images offensive to extremists on the ‘Religious Right’, or any kind of opposition to the corporate status quo, are grist to their mill. Yet in this and most other developed countries, the market – we call it the ‘art world’, a sign of its isolation from other ‘worlds’ – has more power than artists, and those with the courage to take a social tack away from the centre have often suffered for it. Dissenting voices cannot always be heard. At the outset of the Iraq war, radio stations in the UK censored their own playlists favouring ‘light melodic’ tracks that would not upset or offend their listeners.⁷ Even now, images offensive to extremists on the Religious Right, or any kind of opposition to the corporate status quo, are barely permissible. In the Bush administration, censorship has extended to a ban on certain t-shirts if worn in public places (many of which have been privatised). Though artists are often perceived as lone voices for freedom in times of crisis, art is only as free as the society that envelops it.

The Civil Rights Movement was of course the great wake-up call that inspired the student movement, the antiwar movement, and the women’s movement in the decade to come. Its militant heyday in the late 1950s and early 60s offered a break with the recent past and coincided with the peak of Abstract Expressionism or the New York School – a tendency most unlikely

to reflect immediate social concerns, although this did not of course keep some abstractionists off the protest lines. By 1965 a small group of artists called Artists and Writers Protest (initially Writers and Artists Protest) had already been decrying the escalation of the Vietnam war for three years. Among the earliest to speak out against the war was the ultimate abstractionist, Ad Reinhardt, as well as the blunt Minimalist artist/critic Donald Judd and ‘socialist formalist’ Rudolf Baranik.⁸

1965 was the year of the ‘Watts Riots’ in an African American ghetto in Los Angeles, and the death of Simon Rodia, builder of the brilliant Watts Towers;⁹ it was also the year that artists (notably Irving Petlin and Leon Golub) held their own in a public debate with the Rand Corporation, a cold-war think tank. In 1966 artists and critics on the Artists Protest Committee created the Peace Tower in Los Angeles.¹⁰ The tower was intended to remain

Mark di Suvero
Peace Tower or
Artists Tower,
1967

THE TOWER BEING BUILT
(Reprinted from the Free Press, Feb. 11 and 18)

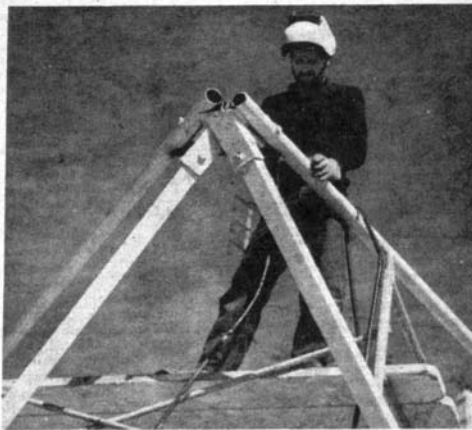


photo by Allen Zak

Sculptor Mark di Suvero is at work building the Artists Tower Against the War in Vietnam at the corner of Sunset and LaCienega. After this photograph was taken, an old wrecked car was hung from the center of the tower in preparation for a city stress inspection.



in place until the war was over, but the landlord caved in to political pressure and it was demolished in weeks. In New York that same year, a legal controversy erupted around the 'aesthetic' use of the American flag, an issue that continued to preoccupy artists and was the centre of the 'Judson Flag Show' in 1970, where three artists were arrested for desecration of the flag.¹¹

Early in 1967 Artists and Writers Protest, by then based in New York, produced Angry Arts Week – the first large public-art antiwar campaign. One of its most memorable manifestations was a long solemn procession of black body bags. Attending police were as moved as the spectators, and flowers were laid on the bags as they passed by. Another component was the *Collage of Indignation*. 150 artists worked simultaneously on 10'×6' canvases that filled the gallery at New York University's Loeb Student Center with both subtle and screaming images on various political subjects. Participants included well-known artists, many of whom had not previously ventured into social commentary (as opposed to countercultural poster artists whose work reached a far larger audience than those from the 'high art' worlds). Needless to say 'quality' was mixed, but as a collective howl of outrage from the art world it was a powerful statement. Stalwart political artist/activist Leon Golub called it 'gross, vulgar, clumsy, ugly! [...] The artist breaks the contained limits of his [sic] art. His actions spill over into the streets.'¹²

The murder of Martin Luther King in 1968 roughly coincided with the student uprising in Paris in May, with an antiwar movement re-empowered by the Tet Offensive, and, on the darker side, disempowered by the increasingly pervasive drug culture that defused political radicalism.¹³ Opposition to the US war on Vietnam's 'gooks' was consistently paralleled by opposition to racism, and sexism was the next target. But 1969 rather than 1968 was the beginning of the broader New York art world's confrontation with these issues.

In January 1969 an international group of artists based in New York protested against the Museum of Modern Art over a strictly aesthetic

⁶ See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York: Basic Books, 1992.

⁷ See <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/war/story/0,,921514,00.html>

⁸ See David Craven, *Poetics and Politics in the Art of Rudolf Baranik*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997.

⁹ The Watts Tower is a collection of 17 interconnected structures built by construction worker Rodia over a period of 33 years.

¹⁰ The Peace Tower was a 58-foot steel tetrahedron that served as a platform for '2' x 2" – works by 418 artists including Judd, Reinhardt,

Frank Stella, Eva Hesse, Nancy Spero and others from all over the world.

¹¹ See GAAG, GAAG: *The Guerrilla Art Action Group 1969–1976: A Selection*, New York: Printed Matter, 1978.

¹² Leon Golub, 'The Artist as Angry Artists: The Obsession with Napalm', *Arts Magazine*, April 1967, pp.48–49. After being shown at Columbia University, the donated art was burned in order to keep it off the market. The male pronoun for artist in Golub's article was surely disputed by his wife, artist Nancy Spero, who – amongst others in Artists and Writers Protest, including May Stevens – was a force to be reckoned with in the antiwar movement; Spero

was a co-founder of WAR, the first women's art group in New York. Three years later, Ron Wolin and I organised *Collage of Indignation II*, a series of individual poster designs at the New York Cultural Center in midtown Manhattan (and elsewhere), with the Utopian goal of printing all contributions as posters. Only Robert Rauschenberg's was eventually produced.

¹³ The influence of the Beats in the 1950s has often been noted with regard to the use of drugs in the 60s; they were adamantly indifferent to political action, though eventually Allen Ginsberg did not follow this path.

(and arguably careerist) artists' rights issue – the selection for a major kinetic art show of a minor Takis sculpture from the museum's collection, without the artist's approval. Takis calmly removed his work; a demonstration followed in the museum's garden, and from this event emerged the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), which epitomised New York art world politics in the 60s. Participants crossed all aesthetic and stylistic lines. The international makeup of the founding group, which included several artists working in kinetic mediums then showing at the Howard Wise Gallery, was significant. In fact, the 'foreigners' involved (from Greece, Germany, Iran, New Zealand and Flemish Belgium) were far more politically sophisticated than the young American artists.¹⁴

An Open Hearing held by the AWC in April 1969 at the School of Visual Arts was jammed, exuberant and wildly contradictory. Yet even the latently right-wing art critic Hilton Kramer, then writing for *The New York Times*, complimented the Coalition for raising 'a moral issue which wiser and more experienced minds have long been content to leave totally unexamined [...]'. A plea to liberate art from the entanglement of bureaucracy, commerce and vested critical interests....'¹⁵ Although galleries and museums were seen by some as the opposition (neglect by them could ruin artists' lives), certain dealers were supportive. The opening show at Paula Cooper's new space on Prince Street in November 1968, a handsome minimal art exhibition, was a benefit for Student Mobilisation Against the War in Vietnam curated by an artist, a Socialist Workers' Party organiser, and a critic. In 1973 a block of West Broadway below Houston was commandeered for replicas of the Chilean murals that were being destroyed by the Pinochet regime, and a benefit show for dispossessed Chilean artists was held at OK Harris on West Broadway while it was still under construction. Meanwhile, the network of alternative galleries that sprang up in the late 60s provided local support for many socially-engaged artists.

As I recall, it was Carl Andre, dressed in his workman-like overalls, who gave the AWC its name by introducing the concept that we were all 'art workers' in precarious solidarity with the working class. (The very idea was taboo in a 'classless' USA, not to mention the internal contradictions, given the middle-class background of most artists and the greater wealth of their collectors.) The Coalition evolved into a chaotic omnipresent anti-organisation that recklessly tackled all the social issues of the day, from antiwar demonstrations to guerrilla theatre performances to innumerable broadsides to analyses of the museums' hierarchies to development of neighbourhood cultural centres. The constantly morphing main body

¹⁴ See L. Lippard, 'The Art Workers Coalition: Not a History', *Studio International*, Nov 1970, pp.171–74.

¹⁵ Hilton Kramer quoted in L. Lippard, 'Notes on the Independence Movement', *op. cit.*, p.26. The AWC published all testimonies in *Open Hearings*, a 1969 booklet, followed by a second volume of *Documents*, 1971.

of the AWC (whoever showed up at meetings) was forbidden to veto anything planned by the committees. The Guerrilla Art Action Group (known as GAAG, and including Jean Toche, John Hendricks, Poppy Johnson and Silvianna, with connections to Fluxus and to European Destruction Art) was the fearless progenitor of the AWC's 'Action Committee', the most radical faction. The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition was a frequent ally (and vice versa).¹⁶ Discussions were hot and heavy. At one point when attendance was flagging, a postcard provocation announced a meeting 'to kidnap Henry Kissinger'. It attracted not only radicals, but the FBI.

Out of the main body of the AWC was also born WSABAL (Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation) – a tiny 'organisation' consisting of artist Faith Ringgold and her two young daughters, Barbara and Michele Wallace,¹⁷ which packed a wallop out of proportion to its size, and WAR (Women Artists in Revolution) – the first feminist artists group, which in turn gave birth to the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee in 1970, which picketed and performed around the Whitney Museum of American Art's then-annual exhibition and can be credited with opening the supposedly 'all-American' show to 400 percent more women than it had previously represented.¹⁸ Ad Hoc's demonstrations and actions (a false press release to the media claiming the Whitney had decided to make the Annual half women and half 'non-white'; faked invitations to the opening to facilitate a sit-in; slide projections of women artists' work on the outside wall of the museum; fake docent tours of the show; whistling in the stairwells; the placing of unused tampons and eggs marked '50% Women' in corners; and weekend demonstrations on the Whitney's convenient 'draw bridge') all owed something to the emphasis on process and temporality, and the de-emphasis of 'objecthood' and commodification that arose in the Conceptual and Fluxus art of the 60s – what I have called 'escape attempts' from the art world (where the bourgeoisie were being patted instead of *epate*) into the 'real world' (where 'the establishment' was represented by universities, the 'military industrial complex' and the Nixon administration rather than by museums).

Conceptual art was critically motivated and socially expansive, though its communication was more *about* than *with* its communicants. Changing the world by changing perception of time and space was, after all, artists' business. Bypassing the institutions, Conceptual artists and their facilitators sped past the conventional procedures of exhibitions and catalogues with a triumphal wave. Decentralising and decentering were among the goals; deprovincialising New York City was a subtext. International Conceptual art

¹⁶ See *Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade: 1963–1973*, New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1985.

¹⁷ See Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the*

Superwoman, New York: Verso, 1990.

¹⁸ See *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution*, New York: WAR, 1971; a Xerox book reissued by the Women's Interart Center, 1973; and L. Lippard, *From*

the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1983.

set up a flexible model that remains useful for socio-political art. It might also be seen as a turnaround of the old figuration/abstraction polarities, given its reintroduction of content to Minimalist form.¹⁹

Yet it was more often the form than the content of Conceptualism that could be perceived as political. (The power of repetition, for instance, has since been applied to public installations of warheads, crosses, caskets, shoes and names in activist art.) Like Minimalism's 'neutrality', 'non-relationalism' and industrial fetishism, Conceptualism was part of a rebellion against the (male) artist-as-hero syndrome of the Abstract Expressionists (who had submitted to exploitation for the official United States cold-war agenda)²⁰ and the formal obsessions with surface and edge of 'post-painterly abstraction'. The 'Information' show at the Museum of Modern Art in June 1970, which included art created in the heat of the Cambodian incursion by the US and South Vietnam known as 'Cambodian Spring', has turned out to be the most political exhibition to be shown at MoMA to this day.²¹ Nevertheless, most of the participants, even those of us who were most committed to social change, were ambivalent about the extent to which art could bend toward politics. 'In the post-war United States,' writes Francis Frascina, 'the concept of [art's] autonomy had been deprived of its oppositional political credentials and subsumed within a formalist aesthetic.' Having thoroughly examined the often dubious and ambiguous positions adopted by artists and critics in light of the inherent contradictions within which we worked, he concludes: 'it is the contradictions that tell us most.'²²

The arts inspired by Minimalism's spatial 'realism' – perceived along with Pop Art as somehow 'democratic' and opposed to (and by) the Greenbergian aesthetic aristocracy – seemed best served by photographic mediums, though they were then raw and rough-edged, bearing little resemblance to their slick, high-tech descendants. Video (hand-held, black-and-white) and photography (also usually black-and-white as colour was, for a while, seen as pandering to pleasure), public and guerrilla performances, printed (or more likely photocopied) texts and publications such as artists' books – were all influenced by the dematerialisation that defined Conceptual art in the 60s.²³ Whereas Conceptualism's goal of subverting museums and markets was, in retrospect, mostly wishful thinking, and whereas the concept of publications as a public space has been nudged aside by the

¹⁹ See L. Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', in Anne Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds.), *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975*, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, pp.16–39.

²⁰ See Max Kozloff, 'American Painting During the Cold War', *Artforum*, Sept 1970; and Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism,

Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum*, June 1974.

²¹ Deborah Wye's *Committed to Print* (drawn from the PAD/D Archive), 1988 is the only other contender, but it was smaller and sponsored by the less-powerful Print Department.

²² F. Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent*, *op. cit.*, pp.148 and 227.

²³ See L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973; reprinted by the University of California Press in 1997; translated into Spanish by Akal, Madrid, 2004.

Internet, its irreverence did distract from conventional modernism – so used and abused in the interests of capitalism and imperialism – and prepared the way for postmodernism and all the ‘posts’ of the 1970s and 80s. Mass-reproduced photo/text mediums continue to prove most effective in pushing the outer frame and challenging the powers that be. They are more easily disseminated into public space and can be more locally productive than cumbersome object media such as painting and sculpture, which may move people in a more visceral but generalised manner. At the same time the role of photographic ‘truth’ has been successfully questioned to the point where nobody really believes anything they see, which in turn provides yet another challenge to those committed to ‘speaking truth to power’.

Having organised politically with artists for many years I admit to complaining, ‘It’s like herding cats.’ The troops are usually more anxious to get back into their studios than to make studios of the streets. In the late 1960s, however, world events had reached a crisis point where artists felt an obligation to speak out whether or not they were well informed or motivated. As Robert Smithson wrote in 1970, ‘The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. If there’s an original curse, then politics has something to do with it.’²⁴ Not everyone felt that way. Many younger artists welcomed the chance to be embroiled in ‘real life’ outside the art world. Their experiences there contributed to a great variety of ‘engaged art’ from then on.

Difficult as it may be for artists to forego their individual trademarks, political work demands collaboration, setting up different ways of working and opening up different contexts. For all the extraordinary images created in studio solitude, communal work has consistently been more effective in the social realm, where rugged egos are a disadvantage. (It is telling that much of the best public art has been made by women.) As Martha Rosler has observed, ‘such a system determines that individual subjects identify the ideas and opinions as their own and so do not form coherent, externally directed resistance’.²⁵ An individual artist – no matter how much of a genius – can rarely present concerted visual opposition as effectively as a group. Over the years, artists’ collectives have proven that there is courage and impact in numbers, and much of the work they do best is virtually invisible as ‘art’.²⁶

²⁴Robert Smithson in ‘The Artist and Politics: A Symposium’, *Artforum*, September 1970, p.39. This ‘symposium’ in print contains a number of fascinating statements by artists on political action.

²⁵Martha Rosler (untitled manuscript) in forthcoming history of *Creative Time*.

²⁶Steve Kurtz, a member of Critical Art Ensemble, a collective

that has specialised in ‘tactical media’ was subpoenaed by the United States Attorney General under the 2001 Patriot Act for possessing ‘biological agents’ (laboratory equipment intended for an art project called *Free Range Grain* for the ‘Interventionists’ exhibition at Mass MoCA. Though he was cleared of ‘bioterrorism’ Kurtz and another professor are being charged and tried with alleged mail

and wire fraud. The twenty-first century has spawned many art collectives internationally, the best known of which is probably Germany’s Wochenklausur. Younger artists are gathering, more or less anonymously, often to make ‘utilitarian art’ about solving urban and even global problems, among them the Yes Men, SubRosa, Free Soil and Spurse.

The geography of Lower Manhattan – the tenements of the Lower East Side and the cast-iron district that became known as SoHo (South of Houston Street) – was an integral component of collective activity in the 60s and early 70s, when artists moved into vacated light-manufacturing lofts (soon to be gentrified by ‘yuppies’).²⁷ There we briefly sustained a refuge, a real live/work artists’ community where artists, dancers, musicians and politicians played and rabble-roused in apartments, lofts, rooftops (‘tar beaches’), galleries and streets. The walls of SoHo were a palimpsest of artistic, political, countercultural and eventually commercial posters, sometimes publicising events and sometimes standing out as events themselves. ‘Streetworks’ – short-lived art ‘objects’ and performative pieces that were essentially vignettes, rootless within the system, free to create their own structures and experienced casually by chance audiences – revealed a basic dissatisfaction with the ‘white cells’ of the institutional/commercial art world. Although the content was seldom directly political, streetworks by nature were radical acts of rejection or celebration.

With every minority group fired up for equality in the 1960s, artists’ rights remained an issue for the AWC. Artists demanded representation on all museum boards, free admission for the public, special galleries for minorities and a voice in institutional decision-making, as well as control over how, when and where their works were shown. A major declaration of independence was Seth Siegelau’s and Robert Projansky’s ‘The Artists Reserved Rights Transfer and Sales Agreement’ (1971), tailored to accompany the sale of every artwork, committing the buyer to pay the artist a percentage of each future sale. Though mightily disliked by galleries, collectors and museums, it was used consistently by a few brave artists and is overdue for resurrection.

Artworkers
Coalition Q. And
babies? A. And
babies., 1970



Discussions with the Museum of Modern Art dragged on until the AWC realised they were just delaying tactics. In late 1969 news of the My Lai (Song My) massacre hit the press and in 1970 the AWC’s Poster Committee published the widely distributed poster *And Babies?* without the museum’s initially promised aid. Photographic masks of Lieutenant Calley’s face were worn en masse in a demonstration in Washington D.C., the idea being that

we were all as guilty as Calley of the massacre because we had not stopped the war. (This was misread by some as support for Calley; so much for irony.) Also in 1970 protests were held in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) at MoMA. An artists’ letter to Picasso asking that the painting be removed from the museum as long as its administration and trustees tacitly supported the

war was derailed by major art-world figures, including Alfred Barr.²⁸ Although MoMA and later the Whitney were prime targets for protest, given their focus on contemporary art, the Metropolitan Museum was also picketed by artists on several occasions, including demonstrations by Black artists against its documentary show on Harlem. Later a group from the AWC Action Committee broke into a trustees' dinner party (taking place in Metropolitan Museum galleries closed to the public) and, in an *ad hoc* gesture, one artist scattered cockroaches on the table 'to keep Harlem on your mind'.

The external art world was no more unified around these actions than was the internal 'membership' of the AWC, which claimed to speak for all artists who did not speak up for themselves. A large number of now well-known artists from the Minimalist and Conceptualist camps participated in Coalition events while others stood at the back of the room watching the three-ring circus with cool condescension. Some older Abstract Expressionists who had been politically active in the 1930s and 40s (and younger artists who were already reaping the benefits of success in the art world) were horrified by our antics and retreated to their studios. The New Left's tactics were clearly a threat to the Old Left, a situation not improved by the AWC's opposition to MoMA's 'First Generation' show; the exhibition was considered 'blackmail' because it encouraged donations to the museum's collections by New York School artists whose work they had not bought (cheap) early enough.

In the 'Cambodian Spring' of 1970, when resistance to the war was at its height after the Kent State and Jackson State shootings, New York Art Strike attracted a critical mass of artists who had not been drawn to the AWC's New Left/Anarchist core, among them Robert Morris, who was Art Strike's elected leader along with GAAG's Poppy Johnson. Demanding closure of all the museums, Art Strike succeeded in briefly shutting down some galleries, as well as Morris's own solo show at the Jewish Museum. (Ironic stickers went up downtown: 'Robert Morris Prince of Peace'.)

The fervour of actions and organising did not last forever. Much of the energy in the AWC was siphoned off in late 1970, when the feminist/women's art movement began in earnest.²⁹ The Coalition's last major action was a 1971 protest against the Guggenheim Museum which had cancelled Hans Haacke's solo exhibition six weeks before it opened, citing its social content as the reason, and fired curator Edward Fry. An AWC conga line spiralling up Frank Lloyd Wright's ramps was led by choreographer/

²⁷ See L. Lippard, 'The Geography of Street Time: A Survey of Streetworks Downtown', in Rene Block, *SoHo: Downtown Manhattan*, Berlin: Akademie der Kunst/Berliner Festwochen, 1976, pp.180–210.

²⁸ The long stories of MoMA's disengagement from an unlikely collaboration with the AWC on the My Lai poster, and the machinations involved with the letter to Picasso are described in detail by Frascina, who notes that the FBI had a huge file on

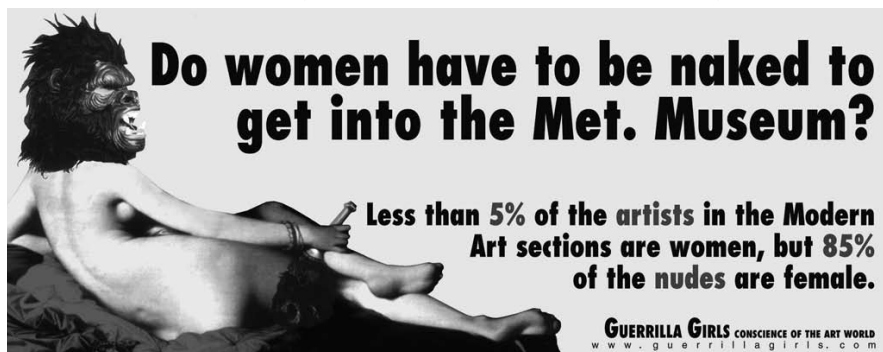
Picasso. See F. Frascina, *Art, Politics and Dissent*, *op. cit.*, pp.161–62, 165–174.

²⁹ WEB, or West-East Bag, founded in April 1971, was a national network of women's slide registries and centres for local organisations.

filmmaker Yvonne Rainer before a gaping public, some of whom joined in. One-hundred or so artists signed a petition vowing not to show at the Guggenheim until the guilty administration was ousted.

Although the subject of this essay is the 1960s, it is difficult to ignore the continuum. When the US abandoned Vietnam and Nixon resigned in disgrace there was a brief lull in oppositional art, but the veterans of all that activism were still around, still young and increasingly better educated in socio-political art theory. The progressive artists groups of the mid 1970s, from Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) to the feminist Heresies Collective, reflected the trend toward theory that had been neglected in the exigencies of direct action. The influence of Conceptual art continued to be felt in a number of collectively edited artists' periodicals and publications perceived as public spaces. Printed Matter was formed in 1976 by an artists' collective to publish and distribute artists' books (books as art, not about art), seen then as a means to infiltrate the general public with cheap, subversive art. Franklin Furnace initiated an archive of artists' publications and provided a venue for innumerable progressive performances and exhibitions.

Within the women's movement, the mid 70s saw conflicts between 'cultural', 'socialist' and 'radical' feminisms, which also led to an era of



Guerrilla Girls
Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?, 1989

'essentialism'. Yet in 1985 the Guerrilla Girls burst on the scene as 'cultural terrorists' with their gorilla-masked anonymity and posters exposing the art world's institutional racism and sexism by naming names – always unpopular in the art hierarchy. They were followed by the spectacular rise and fall of the media-savvy Womens Action Coalition (WAC) in the early 80s.

In 1979 the non-profit gallery Artists Space ill-advisedly mounted an exhibition titled 'The Nigger Drawings' by a young white male artist looking for some attention (which he got, although when the dust cleared he was never heard from again). Howardena Pindell led the campaign against those who insisted that artistic 'freedom' trumped any moral outrage. Artists Against Racism in the Arts (AARA) was formed to ferret out daily racism in the 'unconscious' art world, as well as in the supposedly conscious Left. The same year, concern over the slow-down of art activism sparked the organisation of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation/Distribution), which began as an archive of socially concerned art based in a community centre

theoretical focus as actions diminished. In fact, it could be argued that the emphasis on theory directly diminished activism by belittling

on the Lower East Side, and ironically ended up in the Museum of Modern Art Library, then directed by one of PAD/D's founding members. At the same time, a new generation emerged from the art schools and hit the streets of the East Village, less concerned with geopolitics, but equally reluctant to be swept into the commercial art world without a murmur. They founded free-ranging groups such as the wide-ranging Collaborative Projects (CoLab) and Group Material, Fashion/Moda in the South Bronx, ABC No Rio and World War 3 Comics (the hub of neighbourhood organising around the Squatters movement) on the Lower East Side.³⁰

Gentrification and homelessness were among the urban issues that drew artists to act in the poor neighbourhoods where they lived. These groups created art venues rather than political actions; their unconventional exhibitions were social statements and artworks in themselves – content-focused, temporary, gritty and grungy like the Punk/New Wave club culture that provided their dominant context. If 'rigid' Left politics and feminist 'righteousness' turned some of the younger artists off, and their 'retrochic' and 'politically incorrect' images sometimes turned off the old/new Left in turn, their aesthetic vitality made up for the differences. During the 1986 Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America, a national arts campaign, these 'fringe' elements, along with PAD/D, joined the mainstream in some 30 exhibitions in New York City alone.

The most visible activist group during the Culture Wars of the late 80s was ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), with its pink-and-black 'Silence = Death' logo. ACTUP targeted the homophobic Senator Jesse Helms, the Christian Coalition, the far-flung empires of corporations such as Philip Morris and the innate puritanism of American culture, which showed when faced with art about body, desire and sexual identity.³¹ In 1989 Gran Fury, a smaller related collective, mounted a poster on the sides of New York City buses showing three variously-gendered couples kissing (some of them people of colour, mimicking then-ubiquitous Benetton ads), with the text: 'Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do'. This was the era of media criticism, also a product of the 1960s, when 'The Whole World Is Watching' was a popular slogan. Since then, it has become harder and harder for artists to compete with or even satirise the inanities of commercial media.

³⁰See L. Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power', in Brian Wallis and Marcia Tucker (eds.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, pp.340–358; and Nina Felshin (ed.), *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art Activism*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995.

³¹ See Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDSDEMOGRAPHICS*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1990. This puritanism extended to political opinion, as shown when NEA grants to the publications PAD/D and *Heresies* were vetoed in 1983 (I happened to have co-founded both groups). See L. Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, New York:

E.P. Dutton, 1984, especially 'The Dilemma', 'Sweeping Exchanges', and 'Hot Potatoes'.

Jonathan Schell recently observed, 'All over the world, autocratic-minded rulers ... have learned that *de facto* control of the political content of television is perhaps the most important lever of power in our day. They have learned that it does not matter politically if 15 or even 25 percent of the public is well informed, as long as the majority remains in the dark.'³² This statement challenges progressive visual artists. Television (despite years of hard work by proponents of public-access TV such as Paper Tiger) is economically beyond the reach of virtually all visual art workers.

*Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change.*³³

Edward Said

*Information presented at the right time and in the right places can potentially be very powerful. It can affect the general social fabric.*³⁴

Hans Haacke

Is art the right place? Haven't we always known that art alone cannot change the world and that the support of a majority for the avant-garde is unlikely? ('The people have spoken – the bastards', as a disgruntled US politician once put it.) The question of the freedom of art remains dependent on the broader context in which the art takes place. The faith in information and communication that permeated so much progressive art of the 1960s and early 70s, expressed by the Haacke quote above, was not misplaced nor has it been confirmed, cyberactivism and the blogosphere notwithstanding. The 'global' has replaced the 'international', indicating the strength of multinational corporations and the world organisations that do their bidding. The crux of the matter remains the economic power held by the few and the waning impact of political confrontation in the United States, no matter how many people are out in the streets. Museums are no longer in the picture except when they censor or self-censor; while they still do not appreciate damaging publicity, since the 70s they are mostly indifferent to protest.

This rapid rundown of a mere fraction of artists' contributions to social change originating in and beholden to the 1960s does not do justice to the amount of energy that continues to be poured into social issues even in these hard times. September 11th, 2001 could have been a watershed in some ways. But even as Abu Ghraib and Bush caricatures are omnipresent among the

³² Jonathan Schell, 'Too Late for Empire', *The Nation*, 14 August, 2006.

³³ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York: Vintage, 1996, p.102.

³⁴ Hans Haacke in Jeanne Siegel, 'An Interview with Hans Haacke', *Arts Magazine*, vol.45 no.7, May 1971.

³⁵ A video called *Disarming Images*, the product of an artists group originally affiliated with Not in Our Name is

a compendium of antiwar art that has been shown at Camp Casey, at the gates of Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch and has travelled the country. *Our Grief is not a Cry* for War was one of the group's first actions after September 11th.

‘disarming images’³⁵ produced ever since, large-scale, ongoing activist artist organisations have been another of its casualties. This is in part, I believe, because of the pall cast by the Bush administration’s inept handling of the crisis and the Afghanistan/Iraq wars, not to mention deteriorating rights to privacy, covert/overt government surveillance, increasing executive privilege, a widening abyss between rich and poor, environmental and human health... the horrors are too many to list. Yet the effect of a single super-power and lack of a universal draft has led to a certain apathy about wars being fought mainly by the poor. Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect’ is pervasive, but his ‘optimism of the will’ is in short supply. Significantly, the artwork that has attracted most attention is the collaboratively created *Tribute in Light* – vertical beams rising from the World Trade Center’s Ground Zero; its politics are ambiguous but the image is immensely powerful.

So where are we now? The following remarks give some indication: some radical young artists and groups committed to ‘the creative disruption of everyday life’ were asked, ‘Can there be revolutionary art without a revolution?’³⁶ The Surveillance Camera Players simply say ‘No’. Critical Art Ensemble qualifies the negative: ‘No. There are resistant or contestational cultural or political movements, campaigns and actions but not revolutionary ones.’ Alex Villar replies: ‘I think it is absolutely necessary to sustain goals irrespective of imminent possibilities. Without a radical argument to expand the spectrum of public debates, the democratic range of possibilities contracts to an unbearable degree.’ Similarly, Ruben Ortiz-Torres states: ‘I believe the voice of an individual can exist in a revolutionary way.’ The group e-Xplo cites Julia Kristeva, advocating ‘a renewed relationship to revolt, one in which revolution would involve a critical relationship with oneself...’. Lucy Orta offers: ‘We need to find a new word for revolution.’ And the Yes Men, true to their name and their extraordinary art of disguise and deception, say: ‘Sure!’

³⁶ Separate interviews with the artists in Nato Thompson and Greg Sholette (eds.), *The Interventionists*, North Adams, Mass.: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.

ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A CRITICAL READER

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