

The Art Workers' Coalition: not a history

Lucy Lippard

Studio International

1970, nov.



On April 10 1969, some 300 New York artists and observers thereof filled the amphitheatre of the School of Visual Arts for an 'Open Public Hearing on the subject: What Should Be the Program of The Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform, and to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers' Coalition'. The last time such a large and various group had got together for non-aesthetic reasons concerned the Artists Tenants Association's threatened loft strike in 1961, which did not take place. The hearing was preceded by a list of 13 demands to the Museum of Modern Art and demonstrations supporting them which emphasized artists' rights: legal, legislative and loosely political; they were the product of the newly-named Art Workers' Coalition (temporarily and simultaneously the Artists' Coalition). The AWC was conceived on January 3 1969, when the kinetic artist, Takis (Vassilakis), removed a work of art, made by him but owned by the Museum of Modern Art, from the museum's 'Machine' show, on the grounds that an artist had the right to control the exhibition and treatment of his work whether or not he had sold it. Not a revolutionary proposition, except in the art world.

Despite the specific subjects announced for the Open Hearing, taped and later published verbatim by the AWC, the real content of the night was the airing of general complaints about The System, keyed by Richard Artschwager's use of his two minutes to set off firecrackers instead of talk. The picture of frustrated violence that emerged from this motley cross-section of the art community (70 artists, architects, film-makers and critics, a number of them Black, spoke) surprised the establishment at which it was aimed. As well it might, since art world complaints are made loudly, but in the relative privacy of studios and bars, rarely in public. Those who voiced them were immediately accused of oppor-

tunism by some of those who remained closet protestants. A number of speakers considered the Museum of Modern Art an unworthy object of artists' attention, but a grudging consensus agreed it was the best place to start if only because it is the seat (in all senses) of power; not enough people, time and energy were available then to tackle all the museums at once and MOMA qualified by its rank in the world, its Rockefeller-studded Board of Trustees with all the attendant political and economic sins attached to such a group, its propagation of the star system and consequent dependence on galleries and collectors, its maintenance of a safe, blue-chip collection, and particularly, its lack of contact with the art community and recent art, its disdain for the advice and desires of the artists that filled its void. The demands made in February 1969 were boiled down from 13 to 11 in June, and revised slightly as the nine-plus below to apply to all museums in March 1970:

A. WITH REGARD TO ART MUSEUMS IN GENERAL THE ART WORKERS' COALITION MAKES THE FOLLOWING DEMANDS:

1. The Board of Trustees of all museums should be made up of one-third museum staff, one-third patrons and one-third artists, if it is to continue to act as the policy-making body of the museum. All means should be explored in the interest of a more open-minded and democratic museum. Art works are a cultural heritage that belong to the people. No minority has the right to control them; therefore, a board of trustees chosen on a financial basis must be eliminated.
2. Admission to all museums should be free at all times and they should be open evenings to accommodate working people.
3. All museums should decentralize to the extent that their activities and services enter Black, Puerto Rican and all other communities. They should support events with

which these communities can identify and control. They should convert existing structures all over the city into relatively cheap, flexible branch-museums or cultural centres that could not carry the stigma of catering only to the wealthier sections of society.

4. A section of all museums under the direction of Black and Puerto Rican artists should be devoted to showing the accomplishments of Black and Puerto Rican artists, particularly in those cities where these (or other) minorities are well represented.

5. Museums should encourage female artists to overcome centuries of damage done to the image of the female as an artist by establishing equal representation of the sexes in exhibitions, museum purchases and on selection committees.

6. At least one museum in each city should maintain an up-to-date registry of all artists in their area, that is available to the public.

7. Museum staffs should take positions publicly and use their political influence in matters concerning the welfare of artists, such as rent control for artists' housing, legislation for artists' rights and whatever else may apply specifically to artists in their area. In particular, museums, as central institutions, should be aroused by the crisis threatening man's survival and should make their own demands to the government that ecological problems be put on a par with war and space efforts.

8. Exhibition programs should give special attention to works by artists not represented by a commercial gallery. Museums should also sponsor the production and exhibition of such works outside their own premises.

9. Artists should retain a disposition over the destiny of their work, whether or not it is owned by them, to ensure that it cannot be altered, destroyed, or exhibited without their consent.

B. UNTIL SUCH TIME AS A MINIMUM INCOME IS



GUARANTEED FOR ALL PEOPLE, THE ECONOMIC POSITION OF ARTISTS SHOULD BE IMPROVED IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

1. Rental fees should be paid to artists or their heirs for all work exhibited where admissions are charged, whether or not the work is owned by the artist.
2. A percentage of the profit realized on the re-sale of an artist's work should revert to the artist or his heirs.
3. A trust fund should be set up from a tax levied on the sales of the work of dead artists. This fund would provide stipends, health insurance, help for artists' dependants and other social benefits.

The extent to which each 'member' agrees with each 'demand' fluctuates to the point where structural fluidity of the organization itself is unavoidable. The AWC has as many identities as it has participants at any one time (there are no members or officers and its main manner of fund-raising is a 'Frisco Circle' at meetings, and the number of participants varies as radically as does their radicality, according to the degree of excitement, rage, guilt, generated by any given issue. It has functioned best as an umbrella, as a conscience and complaint bureau incorporating, not without almost blowing inside out, groups and goals that are not only different, but often conflicting. Advocates of a tighter structure, of a real dues-paying union situation, have reason but not reality on their side. Nobody, inside or outside the coalition, has illusions about its efficiency; the difference is that everyone outside thinks it could be done better another way and from the inside that looks impossible.

Don Judd, for instance, has been interested in a union set-up since the Coalition began, but was disgusted with the meetings he visited (and did not, incidentally, try to change or influence them by saying anything about his own ideas, which is too bad, because we could use his blunt, articulate intelligence). In a recent statement on art and politics (*Art-*

forum, Sept. 1970) he wrote: 'There should be an artists' organization. It's very odd to have a whole activity that can't help anyone in the same activity, that can't defend itself against carelessness and corruptions. The organization should have its own money; there could be a self-imposed tax by members on all sales, part from the artist's portion, part from the dealer's.' We've discussed this, but need, naturally, the support of a few more artists who have a portion at all, or a dealer. Judd also says that 'unlike the Art Workers, an artists' organization should decide what it wants to do and go after it practically'. Yet he agrees with our first demand and suggests we state that and talk to the museums. We have, and still are. Then he says that those museums 'who refuse without reasons can be struck'; by whom? Judd and the rest of the art community's silent majority? If all those artists who want a union would get together and take over section B of the Coalition's demands it could comprise another special interest group under the 'umbrella', or as a separate entity. But as long as the AWC's notorious sightseers, now perennial (Smithson, Serra and editor Philip Leider come immediately to mind), many of whom are respected members of the art community and good talkers and would be able to convince a lot of people; as long as they play with themselves in the bar, telling everyone how absurd or mismanaged the AWC is, instead of saying the same things in the public arena (arena it often is, unfortunately), they will be the bane and to some extent the downfall of the Coalition.

If I sound wistful, or over-optimistic, it's because I can't help remembering the beginnings of the Coalition. At the first few open meetings there was a terrific atmosphere of aesthetic and economic mistrust. Eventually basic dislike of organizations, innate snobbism about which artists should or could be associated with, the reluctance to waste time, and revulsion for yelling, rhetoric and opportunism (not unique to the AWC) broke down in favour of common excitement and, finally,



even affectionate tolerance for some of the more therapeutically-oriented participants. Nobody thought it was ideal; and nobody had ever seen New York artists come on any other way, either. Despite the heterogeneous composition, during the winter and spring of 1969 the AWC became a community of artists within the larger art community. The honeymoon period centred around plans for the open hearing and publication of its record and, later, around the 'alternatives committee', whose search for alternative structures ran the gamut between a trade union complete with dental care, a massive takeover of the city's abandoned Hudson River piers for studio and exhibition space (that is now being done by the establishment itself), and an information centre complete with Xerox machine, ending comfortably, if a little wearily, as a discussion group covering the highest tides of idealism and philosophical foam, with which New York art is very much at home. The weekly general meetings consisted of about 60 people, sometimes 100; the committees were much smaller. Both were characterized by reversals and arguments and endless bullshit (usually defined as somebody else talking), naïveté, commitment, and lack of knowledge about how to implement it, a high evangelical pitch reached in the bar after meetings, not to mention the endless phone calls that plague a small organization with no efficient communication channels, all backed up by an excited realization that MOMA was, for some inexplicable reason, afraid of us.

This period culminated in intermural quarrels surrounding the problem of what to do about the Museum of Modern Art's 'blackmail' of First Generation New York School artists (which I consider one of our most important endeavours), and problems of structure, now that the coalition was getting big with what sometimes seemed a false pregnancy. These most often concerned the point of whether or not the general meetings should have veto power over the hard-working committees or

1 Scene in, New York art strike at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, May 22 1970

2 Scene from first Art Workers' Coalition protest against the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 30 1969

3 & 4 AWC picketing the Nelson Rockefeller Collection at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 26 1969

opposed to is the present conservative politicization of the Museum... If the men now controlling the Museum of Modern Art are not politically involved, who the hell is? The AWC did not begin as a political group, but its models were clearly the Black and student movements of the 1960s, and by the time of the Open Hearing it was obvious that non-art issues would assume if not priority, a major rhetorical importance. Though the Black Panthers, the Chicago Seven and other radical causes have been supported; though we have protested by telegram and testimony ecological catastrophes, budget cutbacks to museums, expressways etc., and once gave half the treasury (some £300 from sales of the books) to a Biafran woman who delivered a particularly stirring plea at a meeting, the AWC, like its predecessor and sometime colleague, the Artists and Writers Protest, has concentrated its political energies on Peace, as did the May 1970 Art Strike. On the first Moratorium Day (Oct. 15, 1969) the AWC managed to get the Modern, the Whitney and the Jewish museums and most of the galleries to close, and (with the crucial help of the participating artists) the Metropolitan to postpone the opening of its big American painting and sculpture show till a more auspicious date, though the museum itself stayed open and, with the Guggenheim, was picketed.

The bitterest quarrel the AWC has had with the museum (aside from the 'blackmail' issue) was over joint sponsorship of the Song-My massacre protest poster—a ghastly coloured photograph of the event by a *Life* photographer captioned 'Q: AND BABIES? A: AND BABIES', which was vetoed by the president of the Board of Trustees after an initial, though unexpected, executive staff acceptance of the proposal. We picketed and protested in front of *Guernica*, published 50,000 posters on our own and distributed them, free, via an informal network of artists and movement people; it has turned up all over the world. Our release read, in part: 'Practically, the outcome is as planned: an artist-sponsored poster protesting the Song-My massacre will receive vast distribution. But the Museum's unprecedented decision to make known, as an institution, its commitment to humanity, has been denied it. Such lack of resolution casts doubts on the strength of the Museum's commitment to art itself, and can only be seen as bitter confirmation of this institution's decadence and/or impotence'. Via this and other experiences we discovered that semi-private institutions are unable to buck their trustees, particularly when the issue is one that presents the trustees with a direct conflict of interest. (As Gregory Battcock said at the Open Hearing: 'The trustees of the museums direct NBC and CBS, the *New York Times* and the Associated Press, and that greatest cultural travesty of modern times—The Lincoln Center. They own



T A & T, Ford, General Motors, the great multi-billion dollar foundations, Columbia University, Alcoa, Minnesota Mining, United Fruit and AMK, besides sitting on the boards of each others' museums. The implications of these facts are enormous. Do you realize that it is those art-loving, culturally committed trustees of the Metropolitan and Modern museums who are waging the war in Vietnam? We also discovered that one thing museum administrators can't seem to realize is that most of the art workers lead triple (for women, often quadruple) lives: making art, earning a living, political or social action, and maybe domesticity too. When the museum official gets fretful about our distrust of long dialogues and our general inefficiency (irresponsibility, he calls it), he forgets that he is being paid a salary for 'caring for' work and issues that his opposite number on the picket line produces in return for no financial assurances whatsoever, and that the Coalition itself has to beg time from the 'real' world to get anything done at all.

Certainly it is everybody's individual choice as to how he is going to handle his political burden (though anyone so sheltered as to believe he has no such burden is riding for a shock). The AWC will be powerful only in the art field, where artists have power, and it seems to me that if an artist is more involved in the Peace Movement than in artists' rights he should be working directly for the movement. What anyone can do via the AWC for the Panthers or for peace or for Welfare mothers or trees can be done a hundred times better within those organizations specializing in each of those fields. As an artist, however, he can exert his influence on those institutions which depend on him for their life, to make them speak up and influence others. The fact that these institutions are run by people running other areas of the larger world makes artists' actions as artists all the more important. What is sad is how few artists will even acknowledge their political burden, how many seem to feel that art, and thus their own

special interest groups, including the usually controversial 'action committee' where the militants and the Guerrilla Art Action Group were focussed. I, for one, agreed wholeheartedly with Kestutis Zapkus' anti-veto 'Proposal' circulated in the summer of 1969, which stated, among other things: 'There is no reason why the AWC should model itself on the procedures of conventional bureaucratic organizations. The development of special interests must not be dissipated by a less involved majority'.

The most controversial aspect of the AWC among artists and establishment has been its so-called 'politicization of art' term, a term usually used to cover the Black and women's programmes as well as demands that museums speak out against racism, war and repression. On May 4, 1969, Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times* left-handedly complimented us by saying that the Open Hearing proposed, 'albeit incoherently... a way of thinking about the production and consumption of works of art that would radically modify, if not actually displace, currently established practices, with their heavy reliance on big money and false prestige.' He had 'the vivid impression of a moral issue which wiser and more experienced minds have long been content to leave totally unexamined.' But as the AWC gathered steam (or power), we became less attractive; his second article (Jan. 18, 1970) ended with a plea to all those nice people 'who believe in the very idea of art museums—in museums free of political pressures—to make our commitments known, to say loud and clear that we will not stand for the politicization of art that is now looming as a real possibility'. We wrote a lengthy reply which was published with his third article on the subject (Feb. 8, 1970). In it we said that if by the 'politicization of art' he meant 'political art he should be made aware that the AWC has never offered any opinions on the content or form of art, which we consider the concern of individual artists alone'; also, that 'Mr Kramer ignores the fact that what radical critics are

art, is so harmless that it needs no conscience. At least I don't hear that doubtful statement 'My art is my politics' quite so often since Art Strike and other recent developments. It's how you give and withhold your art that is political. Your art is only your politics if it is blatantly political art, and most of the people who say that are blatantly opposed to political art. The Coalition is neutral; it has always been a non-aesthetic group involved in ethics rather than aesthetics. (Lenin said ethics was the aesthetics of the future.) For the most part, however, the artist's dilemma: Is this the kind of society I can make art in? What use is art in this or any society? Should it have no use, even morally? remains unsolved in or out of the AWC.

In October 20, 1969, Carl Andre read the AWC a devastating summary of its failures as a 'preamble' to its second year of operations. Among his complaints were: 'We have failed to convince Artworkers that it is futile to recapitulate in the art world the enormities and injustices of the American economic system... We have failed to convince Artworkers that the profession of art is not a career but a constant witness to the value of all life. We have failed to convince Artworkers that the essence of art is inspiration and not petty ambition. We have failed to convince Artworkers that a myth of quality is no substitute for the fact of art... THEREFORE WE OF THE ART WORKERS' COALITION DEMAND OF OURSELVES THAT: 1. ART, OUR WORK, BE WIDELY AND HONOURABLY EMPLOYED. 2. ART, OUR WORK, BE JUSTLY COMPENSATED. 3. ART, OUR WORK, BE ALL THE BEST THAT WE CAN LIVE OR DO.' Rhetoric, perhaps; eloquence, certainly. But the central issue always seems to come down to dignity, dignity and tolerance—the central issues of any civil rights cause. Black or woman artists are most disturbing to their colleagues and to the art world at large because their demands for dignity in their profession carry a large quotient of rage. It makes them harder to live with and their co-operation—with other interest groups—harder to retain. Artists are the Blacks of the broader intelligentsia. A bright, angry Black woman artist may be the most explosive factor around. She has the Nothing to Lose that has traditionally made potent revolutionaries.

The ethical role of the Coalition infuriates people. It is frequently criticized for not representing enough of the art community to be listened to; we in turn frequently criticize the rest of the art community for not speaking up, with or against us. The Coalition is out there working and occasionally accomplishing something; where do those guys get off resting smugly in a nest-egg of their own compromises and preferring to fight us rather than the common enemy? In June 1969, during an exchange with artists who had (we charged)

been subjected to blackmail by donating works to MOMA for an 'historical' show that just incidentally had to come from the museum's collections, we wrote: 'Our actions should not be mistaken for those of the community as a whole, but rather as a "conscience" in regard to the existing system. We represent the present membership [of the AWC] and, by default, the passive element in the art community. Anyone who does not speak for himself will be spoken for by us until he does take a position on the various issues... The AWC does not begrudge the success of the artists in this show, to whom we all owe a major aesthetic debt, nor are we judging the aesthetic content of the exhibition. We are all too aware of the conditions in which these artists have existed for years under the present system, and it is this system we would like to change. We have no intention of letting the "watchdog" ghost of Ad Reinhardt lie. In the 1960s large sections of the world's population have realized what Reinhardt realized in the art world long before, that sins of omission and commission, crimes of silence and rhetoric, are equally indefensible.'

The crux of the matter is, of course, that no artist, in or out of the AWC, wants to be told anyone else is thinking for him. Nor does anyone like to be reminded that he is a pawn of the system. It comes harder to more successful artists than to those who are just beginning. The artist is a person who has chosen a life of 'independence' from the conventional structures. He is by nature unequipped for group thinking or action. He has also made certain sacrifices in order to have the advantages of 'freedom'. However, he prefers to bitch to (and about) his fellow artists about the gallery system, museums' ignorance of art and artists' lives, how critics 'use' him and his art, than to do anything about it. And this is, I suspect, because if he admitted to himself how far up against the wall he has been driven, life would be pretty unbearable. The illusion of freedom is of the utmost importance to a person for whom society does nothing else. Even if he is successful (and some of the aesthetically and ethically unhappiest artists in the city, the ones that act like cornered rats when talking to members of the Coalition, are the most successful socially and financially), even then, if he measures his success against his compromises, he is asking for a downer. It's pleasanter not to be aware of the issues than to feel nothing can be done about them. Ad Reinhardt and Carl Andre, two artists who have had the courage to expose publicly the contradictions inherent in their own situation, have come in for far more mud-slinging than their weaker colleagues who have accepted to wallow in suspect patronage, than the artist who is content to be waterboy to a critic or mascot to a collector. A list of questions circulated by an artworker and glued to doors throughout the

city in June, 1969, enraged almost everyone by demanding 'Does money manipulate art? Does money manipulate galleries? Do galleries manipulate artists? Do artists manipulate art? ... Is art a career (career—"highway, a running from or to, carting, carrying")? Is a career carousing? Are galleries pimps for carousing artists cruising immortality?' The real value of the AWC is its voice rather than its force, its whispers rather than its shouts. It exists both as a threat and as a 'place' (in people's heads, and in real space as a clearing house for artists' complaints). Its own silent majority is larger than is generally realized. More important than any of our 'concrete' achievements is the fact that whether or not we are popular for it, the Coalition has brought up issues that American artists (since the 30s) have failed to confront together, issues to do with the dignity and value of art and artist in a world that often thinks neither have either. If the American artist looks with increased awareness at his shows, sales, conferences, contracts as an autonomous and independent member, even mover, of his own system, the AWC has made sense. But if aesthetic differences are a barrier even to a successful artist's understanding or working with equally successful colleagues, as artists for artists' rights, maybe there's no ballgame. Maybe artists will have the unique distinction of being the only vocation in the world that can't get together long enough to assure their colleagues of not suffering from their mistakes. Maybe sweetness, light, idealism and personal integrity, conventionally presumed to characterize art, have been bred out of it by this brutal age. Maybe the Coalition is about not thinking so, even if the odds look bad.

Tomorrow night (September 21) there is a meeting of the AWC, the Art Strike, Soho Artists Association and an artists' housing group, the first of a season, the first of the AWC's third season, the first season after 2000 artists gathered to protest Cambodia and Kent State and Augusta and Jackson and formed the Art Strike, the first of a season that promises to be low on the kind of social (as in socializing) stimulation generated by moneyed institutions. A lot of people know that their time this year might be best spent in the studio and in the streets. You have to be pretty far above it all to stay aloof. At the same time the majority of the art world is afraid to take its bullshit out of the bars and into the streets, afraid of losing the toehold it got last year on the next rung of the ladder, but at the same time afraid that the ladder will have been burned, toppled, or blown sky high just as they get near the top (and there's no fury like that of a man who hates himself for compromising and is having the fruits of his ass-kissing taken from him too). Not a nice situation, but one that will, inside of the AWC or outside, have to be dealt with one way or another, now. □