The Art Workers’ Coalition: Not a History*

On April 13, 1969 some 300 New York artists and observers thereof filled the amphitheater of the School of Visual Arts for an "Open Public Hearing on the Subject." What should be the Program of the Art Workers’ Coalition? To and to establish the Program of an Open Art Workers’ Coalition.” The last time such a large and diverse group had together for nonviolent reason concerned the Artists’ Tenants Association’s threatened loft strike in 1966, which did not take place. The hearing was preceded by a list of thirteen demands to the Museum of Modern Art and demonstrations supporting them which emphasized

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 its acquiescence to the terminal, its outright 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 who fill its void. the demands made in February 1969 were bolted down from thirteen to eleven in June, and revised slightly as the nine-plains below to apply to all museums in March 1970.

8. with regard to art museums in general the art workers’ coalition makes the following demands:

1. the board of trustees of all museums shall be made up of one-thousand 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 exploited in the interest of open-minded and democratic museums. artworks 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 de-cede from the extent to which its activities and services enter Black, Puerto Rican and all other communities. they should support events with which these communities can identify and that they control. they should convert existing structures all over the city into relatively cheap, flexible branch museums or cultural centers 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 (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 and 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 staff should take petitions 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 be given special attention to works by artists not represented by a commercial gallery. museums should also sponsor the production and exhibition of new 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.

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1. until such time as a minimum income is guaranteed for all people, the economic position of artists should be improved in the following ways.

2. rental fees should be paid to artists or their heirs for all work exhibited where admission is charged, whether or not the work is owned by the artist.

2. a percentage of the profit realized on the resale 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 pensions, health insurance, help for artists’ dependents 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 unavailing. 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 “frico circle” in meetings; 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 in-corporating, 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, in-side or outside of 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 setup since the Coalition began but was disillusioned with the meetings it held (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 he wrote: “There should be an artists’ organisation. 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 should be a self-imposed tax on all sales, part from the artist’s portion, part from the dealers.’ (We’ve discussed this, but need, naturally, the support of a few more artists who have a portion at all, or who have a dealer.) Judd also says that “unlike the Art Workers as artists’ organization should be what it wants to do and go after it practically.” Yet he agrees with our first demand and suggests we start that and talk to the museums. (We have, and still are.) Then he says that those museums “who refuse without reasons can be struck. First of all, this is the rest of the art community’s silent majority! If all those artists who want union would get together and take over section B of the Coalition’s demands, they could comprise another special interest group under the umbrella,” or a separate entity. As the AWC’s notorious sightseers, now perennial (Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and editor Philip Leider come immediately to mind), many of whom are respected members of the art community and good radicals and would be able to convince a lot of people—as long as they have a chance to say something. Everyone is afraid or misguided or mismanaged the AWC is, instead of saying the same things that it’s owned by them, will be the base and to some extent the downfall of the Coalition.)
If sound sinful, or overpriced, it's because I can't help remembering the beginning of the Coalition. At its first few open meetings there was a ter-
getic atmosphere of esthetic and economic mistrust. Everyone saw the dis-
like of organizations, time-scarce about which artists should or could be asso-
ciated with, the reluctance to waste time, and revulsion for rhetoric, theo-
ry and romanticism (not unique to the AWC) broke down to favor of common excite-
ment and, finally, even affectation tolerance for some of the more therapeuti-
cally oriented participants. Nobody thought it was ideal; and nobody had ever
seen New York artists come on any other way, either. Despite the heterogoneous
composition, during the winter and spring of 1969 the AWC became a commu-
nity of artists within the larger art community. The honeymoon period cen-
tered around plans for the open hearing and publication of its record and, later,
around the "alternative committee," whose search for alternative structures ran
against the gut a trade union combine with dental care, a massive take-
over 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 center
complete with Xerox machine, ending comfortably, if a little wearily, as a dis-
cussion group covering the highest ideals of idealism and philosophical talk,
with which New York art is very much at home. The weekly general meetings
consisted of about 60 people, sometimes not the committees were much smaller.
Both were characterized by ructions and arguments and endless bullshit (usually
defined as somebody else talking), talked, committed, and lack of knowledge
about how to implement it, a high evangelical pitch reached the in the back meet-
ings, not to mention the endless phone calls that plague a small organization with
no efficient communication channel, all backed up by an excited realization that
JAMA was, for some unexplainable reason, afraid of us.

This period culminated in unvarnished quarrels surrounding the problem of
what to do about what the AWC called MOMA's "blackouts" of first-generation
New York School artists (which I consider one of our most important endeavors),
and problems of structure, now that the Coalition was getting big with what
sometimes seemed a false pregnancy. This more often concerned the points of
whether or not the general meetings should have very power over hard-and-
fast committees or special interest groups, including the usually controversial
"action committee," where the militants and the Guerrilla Art Action Group were
forming, and, for one, agreed wholeheartedly with Kenneth Sagan's and avant-garde
"Pro-
posal" (which in the summer of 1969, which started, 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
cannot be dismissed by a less involved majority.

The most controversial aspect of the AWC among artists and establishment
has been its so-called politicization of art, a term usually used to cover the Black
and women's programs as well as demands that museums speak out against ex-
left-handedly complemented us by saying that the open hearing "proposed, "abject
incorrigibility," a way of thinking about the production and consumption of
works of art that would radically modify, if not actually dissolve, currently es-

tablished practices, with their heavy reliance on big money and false prestige.
He had "the vivid impression of a moral issue which were and more experienced
minds have long been content to leave totally unexamined" but that the AWC gathered
beauties (or power), we became less attractive. His second article (January 27,
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 contribution
seem a small or even nonexistent, yet that we will stand for the politicization of art
which is now looming as a real possibility." We wrote a lengthy reply to this, published with his third article on the AWC in 151, and said that if the "politicization of art" he means "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, "Mr. Kroner
ignores the fact that what radical critics are opposed to is not the "politicization of the museum's" per se but the idea that the museum is now controlling the museum of Modern Art is not politically involved, who the bell is
running, anymore.

The AWC did not begin as a political group. Many of the early members were clearly
the Black Panthers and the second generation of the 1960s, and by the time of the open hearing it was obvious that many issues would arise, if not priority, a major theoretical
importance. Though the Black Panthers, the Chicago Seven and other radical
causes have been suspect, though we've been involved in political and demo-

cratic and ecological causes, expressively, budget cuts to museums, etc., and
once gave half the treasury some $400 from sales of its two documentary books we had published a Blafran woman who delivered a particularly stirring
speech at a meeting, the AWC, like its predecessor and sometime collaborator,
the Artists and Writers Project, has concentrated on political culture for the
New York Art Strike of 1969. The leather clad. (October 16, 1969) the AWC
managed to get the Modem, the Whitney and the Jewish museums and most of the
galleries to close, and (1969) the crucial help of the participating artists was
Metro-fractan to postpone the opening of its big American painting show till 8 am more auspicious date, through the Museum itself stayed open, and
the Guernica was picked.

The bitterest quarrel the AWC has had with the Museum of Modern Art (aside from the "First Generation" controversy) was over joint sponsorship of the
May 4th massacre protest posters-a ghastly colored photograph of the event by a Life
photographer captioned, "O BABBE's A BABBE's," which was picketed and burned before the president of the board of trustees after an initial, though unexpected, execu-
tive staff acceptance of the proposal. We picketed enough on our not much
organized posters on our own and distributed them, free, via an informal network of artists and movement people, has turned up all over the world. Our release read in part: "Free press, free art, free culture, free and equal enfran-
chisement of artists and movement people, with the power of the May 4th massacre protests will receive vast distribu-
tions. But the Museum's unexampled decision to make known, in 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 living, and can only be
seen as further confirmation of this institution's provincialism and/or impotence." Via
this and other experiences we discovered that private institutions are un-
able to back their thrones, particularly when the issue is one that presents
themselves with a direct conflict of interest. We also discovered that one thing
museum administrators can't seem to realize is that most of the people who learned art
for women, often quadruple lives: making art, earning a living, political or social,
action, and maybe domestic work too. When the museum officials get fright-
ed about our stated view of long dialogues and our general ineffectiveness irrespec-
Artists and Writers Protest Art Workers' Coalition marches up Sixth Avenue to War Memorial with black body bags marked with body counts and about 1,000 yard-long flowers bearing the images of American and Vietnamese war dead, May 1969. The crowds, even the policemen, were red and solemn. Along the way, the body bags were strewn with flowers.

ability, he calls it), he forgets that he is being paid a salary for "caring for" work and issues that his opposite number on the picture line produces in return for no financial compensation whatever, and that the Coalition itself has to beg from the "real" word to get anything done at all. Certainly it is everybody's individual choice as to how he is going to handle his political business, though anyone so oblivious as to believe this has to such burden is riding for a stock. 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 of the welfare mothers or trees can be done by directed efforts within those organizations specializing in each of those fields. As an artist, however, he can exert an influence on these issues which depends on him for his 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 said is that AWC artists will even acknowledge their political burden, how many seem to feel that art, and then their own art, is so important that it needs no conscience. At least I don't hear this dreadful statement "My art is my politics," quite so often since Art Strike and other recent developments. It is 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 this are blantly opposed to political art. The Coalition is neutral, it has always been a nonsectarian group involved in ethics rather than esthetics. For the most part, however, the artists dilemma—is this the kind of society I can make art in? What use is art to this or any society? Should it have any use even morally?—remains unanswered in it out of the AWC.

On October 25, 1966, Carl Andre read the AWC a disavowing letter of its future as a "precarious" to its second year of operations. Among his complaints were: 'We have failed to convince Artworkers that it is futile to recapitalize in the arts would the moribund and invisible of the American economic sys-

...The central issue always seems to come down to dignity, dignity and to the central issue of any civil rights. Black or women artists are most disturbing to their colleagues and to the art world at large because their demands for dignity for their profession carry a large portion of rage, making them harder to live with and their cooperation—

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 these guys get off being smug in a role of their own, or do they enjoy to fight us rather than the common enemy? In June 1969, during an exchange with artists who had (be charged) been pressured to do

what the AWC is doing, the following notes appeared in the Museum of Modern Art, which at that point had come from the museum's collection, we wrote: "Our actions should not be mistaken for those of the community arts which are the least to say of the existing system. We present the present membership of the AWC and, by
different, the passive elements in the community. Anyone who does not speak for himself will be spoken for by him. We will fight the war in the various issues... The AWC does not beg the success of the artists in this show, to whom we owe a major exhibition, and we will fight the war in the various issues. 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 an intention of letting the 'watchdog' ghost of the past artist. In the 1960s, large sections of the world's population have realized who Reinhardt realized in the art world long before we all spoke of differentiation in and collaboration, crimes of silence and rhetoric, are equally indefensible."

The cure of the matter is, of course, that no artist, in or out of the AWC, should be told anyone else is thinking for him, he does not have to be reminded that he is a part 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 unopposed
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, rather than do anything about it. And this, as 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 esthetically and ethically subservient 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, it is asking for a divorce. It's pleasant not to be aware of the issues than to feel nothing can be done about them. All 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 mealy-sounding 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 macon to a collector. A list of questions circulated by an artist who is stranded almost everyone in the city in June 1965 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 (continued—highway, a running from or to, carting, carrying)? Is a career carousing? Are galleries pimps for carousing artists creating immorality?”

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 clearinghouse for artists' complaints). Its own silent majority is larger than is generally realized. More important than any of our “concrete” achievements is to say that whether we act or not are for the artists. The Coalition has brought us issues that American artists (as usual) have failed to confront. Together, issues confronting the dignity and value of art and what in a world that often thinks neither has either. If the American artist looks with increased awareness at the shows, sales, contracts, artists as an autonomous and independent member, even more, of his own system, the AWC has made some sense. But if esthetic 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 headline. Maybe artists will take the unique distinction of being the only professionals in the world who can't get together long enough to assure their colleagues of not suffering from their mistakes. Maybe sweetness, love, 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 2) there is a meeting of the AWC, the Art Strike, Sobo Artists Association and an artists' housing group, the first of a season, the first of the AWC’s third season, the first season after 2,000 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 moneved 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 bullsh*t out of the bars and into the streets, afraid of losing the method 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 it gets near the top (and there's no way like this of a man who hates himself for compromising and is having the fruits of his sins kissed 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.
Charitable Visits by the AWC to MOMA and Met*

The Art Works' Coalition struck far out three times last week, between January 3 and 10. The issues underlying the three acting place were (1) discrimination against women in the Whitney Annual; (2) the "discretionary admission charge" on previously free days at the Modern and the Metropolitan, and (3) indigent spending at the Met (which from the other side its poormouth, cries for public funds to continue its name-dropping, park-grabbing Expansion Plan) Discretionary admission or "pay what you wish" for the Met is a euphemism for compulsory contributions, from one cent up, the penny stipulation is not made clear. At both museums the reminder is the same, that indigent spending is a practice at the Met. The observer finds himself doing a dance of imitations, in America, culture itself is intimidating, and music-hall tunes and jewelry store exhibition installations aren't changing that, they cost a lot too.

Monday, 2.30 m., at the Museum of Modern Art, two lines form halfway down the block for the Stein collections show, because Monday was until recently "free day" invaded out of MOMA by the AWC 1 year ago. We got Monday because the museum was lower then. Now it averages 4,000, and the museum's wounds are not healed by the immediate admission hike to $1.50 on other days. The AWC group moves past the ticket windows, where yellow slips register your "contribution" and remind you that it's tax-deductible; we refuse to pay at the guarded rope. Blow whistles when we are stopped, a letter sent to director John Hightower is read to the crowd. It protests denial of free admission on the one day on which minority groups and students could possibly see the art at such prices and suggests that if the museum is too expensive for them, why doesn't it provide and the blue-chips hidden in the statues can no people see it as on us on the walls? A protest taken down the rope barrier and a lot of people in the line see their chance and bolt the guards in the confusion, disappearing into the galleries.

The rest of us stand around inside the gallery, the guards get rough and drag some of us out, saying we are under arrest (but the cops never show up). For the next 3 hours, chaos—people in the lines try to figure it out. Sympathetic young people also refuse to pay ("You say pay what I wish, well, I don't wish to pay anything— that is OK."). We scatter around the lobby to answer questions and persuade people to give only a penny if they must give at all (4,000 pennies instead of 4,000 dollars taken in that day would make our point nicely). The museum lawyer is present, getting his teeth. The ticket seller is so disgusted that at one point he throws handfuls of yellow slips up in the air and out of his booth. The event is taped and photographed throughout. MOMOA Monday, like Whitney Saturday's, may become institutions in themselves. This week a similar action was performed again.

Tuesday, 8 m., the Metropolitan Museum, an acquisitions (and deacquisition) Committee meeting cam trustees, cocktails and dinner (in symboically the Louis XVI Wrightsman period room). Tuesday is the Met's one night, but that doesn't stop director Tom Hoving from closing off the French section for the banquet. Food and drinks are served in and around the art. Pre-Hunting, the museum acquired more in businesslike circumstances, but it can't hurt to have everybody, well, what you wish before the committee make their rival presentations. By 8 m., odd figures appear in the medieval hall near the screened-off Wrightsman rooms, peer around disappear, reappear with others—the AWC playing intrigue, casting the joint, whispering in corners, distracting guards, checking entrances... but it works.

Suddenly about fifteen people invade the dinner, flashbulbs flash, get arrested, mum, the first are greeted with polite resignation ("Oh my, is this the Art Works' Coalition!"), but as the numbers increase, there is obvious seminar, and then great outrage! distant for such bad taste! (The museum's secretary later tells us this is not "playing the game," that we should have told them ahead of time.) Guards appear, grab at camera, push and shoo us out, whistles shall, comments are shouted about the taste and eating habits of the Acquisitions Committee in a people's museum; one invader leaves cockroaches from a box onto the dinner table ("to keep Harlan on your minds"); a rough guard is kicked back; film is confiscated, but our professional photographer saves hers, first by yelling a rampaging guard. "Don't touch me, I'm pregnant."" Then by stuff ing the goods into her underpants and marching out. Another member evades guards andIFF tells the usher, where a startled public has been herded to the tune of a noisy museumwide alarm; all outside doors are locked, frustrating those who think it's a fire. (If anyone anybody into the galleries free during the demonstration.) One AWC member is chided and wood upon by guards, the invaders are locked into a security room and visited there by the secretary and another petit fonctionnaire. We are told, indeed it is the discipline of the 90's, that the discipline has come out of public funds, but "out of the Acquisitions Committee's own pockets" (so what, why isn't that funded money used for something more useful than feeding the starving trustees? And this goes on every 2 months): that they are only chicken "at twenty-nine cents a pound." (But someone noticed they were drinking red wine, how uncivil, or what was the second course?) The general notion of cocktails was never wasted.

*Reprinted with permission from The Element (Jan. 1973). The third part of this essay on a charitable visit to the WYEP was the Ad Woman's Letters Committee has already been published in From the Center.
The Dilemma

The following day the man who had been
choked wrote Henry charging brutality; his house keys had been taken in the
process and were never returned. 2

Art isn't entertainment. It should be free to anyone who is or might be inter-
ested.

NOTES
1. The Whitney Annual was picketed every Saturday that year by protesting women.
2. For the further adventures of Jean Toche and Joe Hendricks, see the Guerrilla Art Ac-
    tion Group, see their book 64462 (Printed Matter, New York, 1973), in particular the ac-
    counts of the notorious "flag case" and the Judson Three.