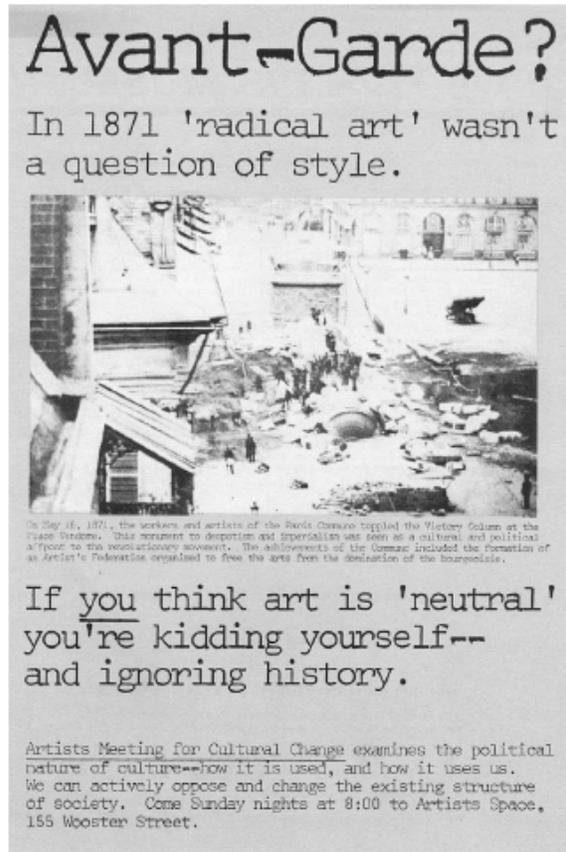


Art Out of Joint: Artists' Activism Before and After the Cultural Turn

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End page from An Anti-Catalog, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (1977)
(darkmatterarchives.net)

This essay sketches a history of artists who, in response to external events, chose to abandon, at least for a time, their studio practice in favor of more direct political action. While my primary focus is on the years of the post-war “cultural turn” between 1965 and 1989, the genealogy of such actions stretches back at least to the painter Gustave Courbet and his

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involvement in the Paris Commune during the late nineteenth century, and continues today with groups such as Liberate Tate, Occupy Museums, and artists in Syria and Egypt's Tahrir Square revolution who asked themselves whether or not there was even time to make art under such demanding circumstances.² The tendency I focus on accelerated considerably after the late 1960s through informally organized art-based collectives like Black Mask, Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), Red Herring, PAD/D, Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, and Critical Art Ensemble, all of whom eschewed the white box for the public sphere. This same lineage of self-directed activist culture also includes the Gulf Labor Coalition (GLC), an informally organized alliance of artists, writers, and academics focused on pressuring the Guggenheim Foundation to improve sub-standard labor conditions in Abu Dhabi where immigrant workers are constructing another spectacular Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry. GLC's practice, aggressively ignores established rules regarding the non-partisanship and objectivity of researchers, as well as classical notions of aesthetic disinterestedness.

This fierce noncompliance with research and artistic norms has emerged among cultural producers at earlier moments of crisis, almost as if the experience of extreme political duress forces us to bump up against the limits of our assigned stations. For artists, whose social mentality pivots on the belief that art is self-directed labor and thus free and without limits, this external bump is a particularly jarring experience. Occasionally the jolt leads down the path towards radicalization, though it always involves some degree of disruption regarding familiar assumptions about one's field of professional activity. Inevitably, gatekeepers of a given discipline attempt to manage these dislocating moments. When artists engage in direct political action, the artworld tends to respond with renunciation or denial.

In perhaps all other vocations save for journalism, where objectivity is considered paramount, and the priesthood, where a concern with the afterlife is supposed to trump worldly injustice, an individual's social or political activism is understood to have little or no assumed impact on his or her professional identity. Doctors cross borders in order to care for disaster victims, lawyers establish NGOs to assist victims of injustice. No one concludes that a commitment to liberal social change alters the application of battlefield triage or standard litigation procedure. However, when cultural producers become politically engaged, allegations fly about professional deformation. Moreover, while priests and journalists are threatened, or even assassinated, for siding with impoverished victims of injustice, artists are

² With the post-War rise of mass-consumerism "Culture," according to Michael Denning, began to be understood as no longer solely the property of an elite, but something that the entire population could participate in. "Suddenly after 1950 everyone discovered that culture had been mass produced like Ford's cars; the masses had culture and culture had a mass." (Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), p 2)

more typically chastised for perverting their talents towards propagandistic ends. Serious culture, so the orthodox position insists, must remain in its proper place, detached, disinterested, and depoliticized. And if an artist is compelled to engage in social criticism it must always take place within the formal vocabulary of art, not politics. This later point was driven home fairly recently to the GLC when Guggenheim staff members called for an end to the group's Abu Dhabi boycott while simultaneously suggesting that we instead express our opinion through works of art.³

Confronted with this advice, we heard a reverberation of Hans Haacke's seminal encounter with the Guggenheim in 1970, when the museum cancelled his exhibition on political grounds. In the words of director Thomas Messer, Haacke's piece about corrupt real estate ownership in New York City was "an alien substance that had entered the art museum organism." Critics who consider it perfectly natural that an artist produces ultra-luxury commodities affordable only by .01 percent of the population, are quick to condemn politically active artists as professionally corrupt. For example, Hilton Kramer denounced Deborah Wye's 1987-88 Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) exhibition of political graphics, *Committed To Print*, in the *New York Observer* under the headline, "Show of Political Prints at MoMA Echoes the Bad Taste of the 1920s." For all intents and purposes, Kramer was red-baiting the museum, which never again hosted a large, explicit exhibition of confrontational works of political art.

If social activism by doctors and lawyers does not impair or diminish medical or legal expertise, then what is it about the labor of artists and cultural producers that leads to charges of professional deceit so onerous that it tars the very identity of what it means to be an artist? After all, if direct political engagement is out-of-bounds to serious visual artists, then a large branch must be lopped off the trunk of art history. And yet, perhaps this is not such a loss? The record of artist-initiated solidarity and direct action suggests that a subtler interpretation is in order.

³ Needless to say, the alleged "radicality" of institutional critique was never so deeply compromised as it seemed at that moment in 2011, although earlier confrontations with mainstream museums had similar outcomes. For example, when the Art Workers' Coalition challenged, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ideological neutrality of art, the cold warrior art critic Hilton Kramer proclaimed in a *New York Times* editorial that "the time has come for all of us 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 politicalization of art that is now looming as a real possibility." (Hilton Kramer, "Do You Believe in the Principle of Museums?" *New York Times* (18 January, 1970), D25)

painters such as Georgia O'Keefe, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Mark Rothko, none of whom were known for making explicitly political art.

We are grieved by American policies in Vietnam. We are opposed to American policies in Vietnam. We will not remain silent before the world. We call on those who wish to speak in a crucial and tragic moment in our history, to demand an immediate turning of the American policy in Vietnam to the methods of peace. (April 18, 1965).⁴

This public show of opposition to military action in Vietnam was followed by the collaborative construction of the Peace Tower in Los Angeles in 1966, a 58 foot-high steel tower covered with 400 anti-war artworks, standing in a dirt-filled lot between Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles. One year later, Angry Arts Week took place in New York, involving Bread and Puppet Theater and members of Black Mask as well as Leon Golub and Max Kozloff. The group produced a show called “The Collage of Indignation,” which was exhibited at NYU’s Loeb Student Center.⁵ On the West Coast, Angry Arts included members of the Longshoreman’s Union, long associated with progressive politics. In the borderlands to the south, groups of artists associated with the Chicano Movement, or *El Movimiento*, including the Royal Chicano Air Force, generated posters, performances, direct actions and murals in support of the UFW grape boycott. One group of migrant farmers formed Teatro Campesino, a political theater troupe that initially used flatbed trucks as mobile stage sets in order to reach workers directly in the fields.⁶

More militant tactics soon emerged. A 1966 manifesto from the anarchist collective Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers proclaimed: “a new spirit is rising. Like the streets of Watts we burn with revolution. We assault your gods. DESTROY THE MUSEUMS—our struggle cannot be hung on the walls.”⁷ Across the Atlantic, the Situationist

⁴ “End Your Silence,” *New York Times* (April 18, 1965), Section 4, E5, cited in Francis Francina, *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 50.

⁵ An excellent account of these projects and programs is found in Lucy R. Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1990).

⁶ See Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

⁷ Black Mask no. 1, November 1966, cover printed in Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (Autonomedia, NY, 2011).

International's affiliation with striking university students in the events of May 1968 was a high-profile illustration of how artists were exceeding the limits of their studio practice in order to directly engage in political action. Situationist-inspired slogans ("The society that abolishes every adventure makes its own abolition the only possible adventure," or "To Hell with Boundaries") scrawled on city walls by militant students underscored the sense of societal impasse. Under the Situationist banner, artistic production was transformed into an array of ideas, organizational platforms and political actions that influenced the practice of Conceptual Art, emerging at approximately the same time, and also the later work of tactical media activists in the mid-1980s and early 1990s such as Critical Art Ensemble, The Yes Men, Electronic Disturbance Theater and the Zapatista Networks in Chiapas, Mexico.⁸

In 1969, a boycott was organized against the 10th São Paulo Biennial in protest of Brazil's repressive military regime, and, in New York City, the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) was founded. Among its core group was Conceptual artist Hans Haacke, who remains active today in GLC. Initially, AWC functioned much like a trade union that viewed museums, their boards, and their top administrators as a *de facto* managerial class who effectively represented not artists or the public good, but the interests of the commercial art market. AWC took on the task of revealing this class conflict by staging protests outside MoMA, the Met, and the Guggenheim museums. Among the demands formally presented to these institutions were a call for a royalties system whereby collectors would pay artists a percentage of profits from the resale of their work and a request that the museums "should be open on two evenings until midnight and admission should be free at all times."⁹ Before it disbanded in 1971, AWC members marched in support of striking staff at MoMA, called on museums to set aside exhibition space for women, minorities, and artists with no gallery representation, and stridently protested the war in Vietnam, thus seeking to leverage their status as cultural producers to achieve social, political and economic reforms for artists, but also for a larger conception of society. Member Lucy R. Lippard summarized AWC's tactically focused critique of established art institutions as follows:

⁸ See Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette (eds.), *The Interventionists: A Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

⁹ Similar groups to AWC emerged at or about the same time in Atlanta, Georgia, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and in Canada where this 1969 organizational legacy remains alive today as the Canadian Artists' Representation/*Le Front des artistes canadiens* (CARFAC). Indeed, the contemporary advocacy group Working Artists for the Greater Economy or W.A.G.E. and their ongoing campaign to standardize artist's fees within the US not for profit artworld is modeled in part on CARFAC. See Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 134.

As a public and therefore potentially accountable institution, the Museums were targeted in order to make points not only about artists' rights but also about opposition to the war in Vietnam, to racism and eventually sexism, and about the institutional entanglement of aesthetic with corporate finance and imperialism.¹⁰

In 1970, Artists and Writers Protest joined forces with the AWC in a mass letter-writing campaign calling on Pablo Picasso to withdraw his anti-war canvas *Guernica* from MoMA, where it still hung at the time. Later that year, New York's Attorney General shut down *The People's Flag Show* at Judson Memorial Church, an exhibition that included Abbie Hoffman and a range of artists protesting the war in Southeast Asia. Three participating artists were arrested on charges of "Desecration of the Flag."¹¹ In the UK, the community arts movement had radicalized over the course of the 1960s, and in 1970, a group of artists led by Gustav Metzger marched on the Tate Gallery under the name of the International Coalition for the Liquidation of Art. Their intent was to debate with museum "visitors and staff about the complicity of museums in racism, sexism, war," while demanding "equal representation of women, ethnic minorities, and greater decentralization of culture."¹² The following year, and clearly under the influence of AWC, Mary Kelly, Kay Fido, Margaret Harrison, and Conrad Atkinson founded the Artists Union, among whose goals was to establish resale rights for all British artists.¹³ Self-interest by artists recognizing their status as a type of worker typically evolved to other levels of protestation. Robert Morris and Poppy Johnson had initiated a one-day shutdown of all New York museums under the heading of the *New York Art Strike Against Racism, War and Repression* in 1970 to protest Richard Nixon's bombing campaign in Cambodia, among other war-related outrages; Metzger would later call on artists to cease making art altogether, between the years 1977 and 1980.¹⁴ In

¹⁰ Lippard is cited in Julie Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 79.

¹¹ See Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater in the Street: Politics and Performance in Sixties America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), pp. 151-53.

¹² John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 30-32.

¹³ Walker, *Left Shift*.

¹⁴ Julia Bryan Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); cf. Gabriel Mindel Saloman, "On Hiatus: The Imminent Impossibility of the Art Strike," *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Spring 2015), <http://tinyurl.com/ohlbyv5>.

1979, Goran Đorđević called for an art strike, citing “the art system’s unbroken repression of the artist and the alienation from the results of his practice,” and Stewart Home would later promote *The Art Strike 1990-1993*. But in none of these instances was anything sustainable generated, making these attempted withdrawals from the artworld not significantly different from Lee Lozano’s 1969 General Strike Piece and 1971 Boycott Piece, which are far more intellectually engaging projects that ultimately led the artist to turn her back on the New York artworld altogether with Dropout Piece (begun c.1970) in which she pledged to

Gradually but determinedly avoid being present at official or public “uptown” functions or gatherings related to the “artworld” in order to pursue investigation of total personal & public revolution.¹⁵

And yet, before her death from cervical cancer in 1999 several prominent galleries featured retrospectives of her work.

In 1970, the Mexican art collective *Proceso Pentágono* was invited to participate in the 10th Biennale De Paris, and decided to publish a “Biennale counter-catalogue” as a subversive protest against *Operation Condor*, a CIA-led terror campaign targeting leftist students and workers across South America. According to historian Rubén Gallo, when the Biennale organizers got wind of this project, director Georges Boudaille sent “a laconic letter to the groups informing them that the upcoming exhibition was “an artistic event and not a political one,” and urged them “to behave professionally.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, back in New York, an AWC faction calling itself Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) staged a mock gun battle in front of MoMA to protest the fatal shooting by National Guard troops of unarmed anti-war student protesters at Kent State University. GAAG carried out numerous direct actions inside MoMA to protest the wartime draft and the lack of representation of artists of color, utilizing tactics similar to those of Liberate Tate in recent years. Similar direct action was carried out in Toronto as artists chained themselves to the doors of the Art Gallery of Ontario, to protest Mercury pollution coming from the nearby Reed Paper Company’s mill. Eventually members of GAAG were refused entry into the MoMa, while in

¹⁵ Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall Books, 2014); cf. Lucy R. Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” from the introduction to *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

¹⁶ See Rubén Gallo, “The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism during the 1970s,” in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (eds.), *Collectivism After Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Canada Reed later compensated First Nations' people for heavy metal contamination after years of public protests by both artists and activists.¹⁷

Cultural producers strongly supported the anti-war movement, but they also organized in support of striking workers, and in solidarity with numerous liberation movements that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1974, the UK Artists Union presented a show, "United We Stand: Exhibition in Solidarity with the Miners" at the miners' union headquarters in London, while artists protested the exclusion of women one year later outside the exhibition "Condition of Sculpture" at the Hayward Gallery. That same year, Mary Kelly collaborated with the Berwick Film Collective on a feature-length movie, *Nightcleaners*, about London's female janitorial workers. The film was intended to be part of a unionizing campaign and not a work of gallery art.¹⁸ In 1976, artists picketed the Whitney Museum to denounce an exhibition celebrating the US bicentennial, that comprised (with only one exception) works by white men, and entirely drawn from the collection of billionaire philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III. The group Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, which formed in angry response, then produced *An Anti-Catalog*, which probably represents the first substantial interpretation of American art from a socially contextualized perspective rather than a formal or biographical one.¹⁹ And in 1977, London-based Conrad Atkinson was among a group of professional artists who designed banners for May Day labor demonstrations, while the Camera Work Collective engaged in street battles with police as squatters in Lewisham were being evicted.²⁰ That same year in Los Angeles, artist Leslie Labowitz, in collaboration with Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and the National Organization of Woman (N.O.W.), successfully forced record companies to cease using offensive, sexist imagery in their advertisements. The campaign was carried out through a combination of boycott tactics and publicly performed demonstrations (Labowitz and fellow artist Suzanne Lacy called them

¹⁷ Karl Beveridge points out that the late filmmaker and artist Joyce Wieland actually demonstrated against a 1976 exhibition entitled *Changing Visions* that she was part of in order to call attention to environmental damage caused by the paper mill who also happened to be sponsoring the show. (Email to Author, February 9, 2015)

¹⁸ See Walker, *Left Shift*, p. 137.

¹⁹ *An Anti-Catalog* is available for free download at <http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/>.

²⁰ See Walker, *Left Shift*, pp. 204-207. Squatters recently moved back into Lewisham: Sarah Trotter, "Squatters Invade Lewisham Royal British Legion Headquarters," *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* (9-10 June, 2014), <http://tinyurl.com/omua8z>.

“media performances”) staged specifically to attract mass news coverage. These projects prefigured the work of tactical media artists in the 1990s.²¹

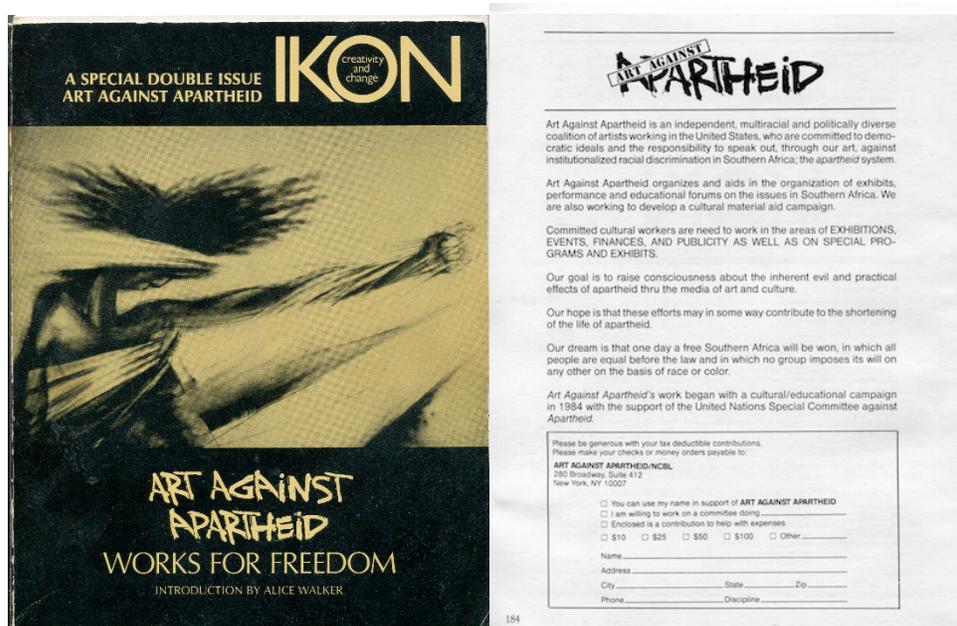


Illustration: Special issue of Ikon journal featuring the Art Against Apartheid exhibition, Number 5/6 (Winter/Summer, 1986) (darkmatterarchives.net)

Acts of solidarity and direct action by artists continued into the 1980s. At the start of the decade, French Fluxus artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest and Spanish writer and artist Antonio Saura initiated Artists of the World Against Apartheid. To honor the boycott of South Africa, which had been in place since the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, they curated a traveling exhibition to educate audiences about the racial injustice in that country. The collection would be donated to South Africa following its liberation from apartheid.²² A similar initiative had been undertaken in 1973 by two Chilean exiles, who organized a collection of some 1,800 works of art into The Resistance

²¹ See Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 167.

²² Rhetoric by Western businesses about labor conditions under South African apartheid in the 1970s is echoed today by indifference towards the plight of migrant workers in the Gulf. In 1972, a *Fortune Magazine* article celebrated South Africa's cheap labor, arguing that, "South Africa has always been regarded by foreign investors as a gold mine, one of those rare and refreshing places where profits are great and problems small. Capital is not threatened by political instability or nationalization. Labor is cheap, the market booming, the currency hard and convertible." Cited in Gay W. Seidman, *Beyond The Boycott: Labor Rights, Human Rights, and Transnational Activism* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), p. 49.

Museum in Solidarity with Salvador Allende. This later inspired Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri to curate the International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine, which opened in Beirut in 1978.²³

In 1981, a hundred artists demonstrated against an all-white, all-male exhibition of artists at the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art (LACMA), wearing photographic masks of museum director Maurice Tuchman. Even mainstream art critic Christopher Knight wrote indignantly:

After a decade of neglect of contemporary art in general and L.A. art in particular, for LACMA to re-emerge into the field with an exhibition of artists whose rise to prominence was benignly assisted by common racist and sexist attitudes (especially when racism and sexism were highly visible concerns of the Los Angeles art community in the intervening decade) serves to reopen old wounds rather than celebrate an artistic heritage.²⁴ (*Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (August 19, 1981))²⁵

²³ Salti recently organized an exhibition about the International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona entitled Past Disquiet (<http://tinyurl.com/ounlkoc>). Notably, the 54th Venice Biennale special edition that took place between October 1974 and 1975 was organized under the title *Libertà per il Cile* (Freedom for Chile), to recall the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende.

²⁵ Stacy Allen, "Protest at the Los Angeles county museum, 1981," East of Borneo Blog, posted July 13, 2012: <http://www.eastofborneo.org/archives/protest-at-the-los-angeles-county-museum-1981>



The Committee Against Fort Apache (CAFA) protesting in the South Bronx in 1981 (Photograph courtesy of Jerry Kearns)

On the East Coast a boycott was called against the film *Fort Apache the Bronx* (1981), an urban exploitation movie starring noted liberal actor Paul Newman that was set in the crumbling South Bronx. Opponents from the Puerto Rican and Black community formed The Committee Against Fort Apache (CAFA). The cultural significance of these protests attracted the attention of *Artforum*'s editors who invited artist and CAFA member Jerry Kearns to submit a piece on the protest in collaboration with critic Lucy Lippard. But when their essay "Cashing in a Wolf Ticket" was delivered the noted art magazine initially refused to publish the piece because the authors openly sided with the boycott activists. Eventually "Wolf Ticket" went to press but only after *Artforum* added a disclaimer alerting readers to the fact that the opinions expressed by Kearns and Lippard were not those of the journal's editors. This addendum may be the only such instance of a disclaimer ever printed in the journal. Between 1976 and 1980 Kearns was also active in the Cultural Committee of The National Black United Front and Amiri Baraka's Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union, where he used photography to document boycott actions, stop work tactics, police brutality, and courtroom testimony. These were predominantly African American organizations to which belonged not only Kearns, but also three other white former members of *Fox Magazine*, a politically focused offshoot of the UK-based *Art & Language* collective that published between 1975 and 1976.

By the middle of the decade, President Ronald Reagan had launched a not so covert war in Central America, aimed at overthrowing the revolutionary Sandinista government of Nicaragua and targeting leftists in neighboring Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In response, the New York-based artists' collective Group Material collaborated with an El Salvadorian support group to curate an exhibition for a popular urban dance club, and the Political Art Documentation/Distribution collective paraded a giant blue, inflated Pac Man beast with the features of Uncle Sam in front of the White House. In 1984, Leon Golub, Lucy Lippard, Doug Ashford, John P. Weber and others organized *Artists' Call Against Intervention in Central America*, which brought together artists, alternative spaces, small commercial dealers, and even a few major art galleries in a consciousness-raising mobilization focused on Reagan's policies south of the border.²⁶

Artists' Call may have been the last major art project of this period in which the notion of solidarity between cultural workers and a social justice campaign was central to the very conception of the operation. It was the last time that groups of professionally trained, high profile artists acted beyond their immediate set of interests as cultural workers, women, African-Americans, Latinos, or LGBTQ individuals. Notwithstanding the significance of later groups, such as Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls, the focus of artist engagement in direct protest in the later 1980s was considerably narrowed, limited to countering injustices directed at specific social groups that overlapped with the population of artists as opposed to addressing systemic inequities or ideological structures endemic to contemporary capitalist society. While many individual artists participated in actions organized by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), it seems that in the aftermath of the fall of actually existing socialism, a different paradigm of activist art began to emerge, at once less ideologically romantic and more pragmatic, in which acts of tactical public intervention were directed at correcting particular offenses, or sometimes even understood as interventionist ends in themselves. And although some artists remained committed to broader change by working with or in tandem with the counter-globalization and pro-environmentalist protest campaigns such as the Global Justice Movement, the artworld backed away from notions of wholesale social and political confrontation and change.²⁷ Gone was the cultural drive

²⁶ See Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art*, p. 71.

²⁷ The anti-globalization "movement of movements" as it was sometimes called gave birth to an impressive array of cultural activities, but most if not all of this imaginative work remained off the radar screen of the mainstream artworld, as well as much of the so-called alternative art scene as well. Valuable overviews of this social movement culture can be found in George McKay (ed.), *DiY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*, (London: Verso, 1998); Notes from Nowhere (ed.), *We are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003); Josh MacPhee, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007).

to imagine an ecstatic revolutionary event such as May 1968 or an alternative future in which social justice prevailed over oppression and militarization. In the 1990s and 2000s, most “engaged” artists directed their attention at everyday life experience, or cultural identity. Two dominant theories at the time included Nicolas Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics and Tactical Media (TM). Though incompatible in many respects both concepts eschewed ideology, including that of the Left. TM theorists David Garcia and Geert Lovink once alluded to Marxism as “vaporware”: a software product announced with much fanfare that never actually materializes, although it is never officially abandoned either.²⁸

TM itself did not last long, holding out only until a globally integrated system of electronic surveillance was implemented after the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001. With the post-911 Patriot Act empowered investigation of Critical Art Ensemble co-founder Steven Kurtz starting in 2004, followed by the high profile tribulations of journalist and WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange in 2010, the espionage conviction of Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, and the self-exile of National Security Administration whistleblower Edward Snowden to Russia in 2013, many of the electronic loopholes TM exploited, such as RTMark’s fake George W. Bush campaign website *gwbush.com* and denial-of-service attacks on servers carried out as a form of digital “sit in,” have become impossible to accomplish while remaining clandestine, if not actually criminalized along the lines of Pirate Bay, identity theft, and Internet hacking.²⁹

These technological and ideological shifts were followed by a second blow: the crushing weight of capital’s faltering economic system and the 2007-8 economic meltdown, which pushed artists into an ever more precarious existence alongside many other types of uneducated service employees, but also over-educated creative workers. Their virtual proletarianization in recent years has only added insult to injury. The cultural agency that has emerged since is far less sanguine about the power of culture to change anything. Contemporary artist Pedro Lasch puts it succinctly. Noting that in May of 2006 the *New York Post* extensively covered the food and fashion associated with *cinco de Mayo* celebrations in the US and Mexico, even though, at that same moment, unprecedented mass demonstrations by undocumented workers were taking place across the United States, all of which the paper ignored, Lasch concludes: “I once

²⁸ “Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, not some vaporware promised for the future. But what we can do on the spot with the media we have access to.” (David Garcia and Geert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media,” *Nettime.org* (May 16, 1997), <http://tinyurl.com/ng3f77>)

²⁹ More about the Steve Kurtz investigation can be found at the Critical Art Ensemble Defense Fund website: ww.caedefensefund.org; see also RTMark, which was the artistic predecessor to The Yes Men, at: <http://www.rtmark.com/>.

thought that when you win the battle of culture, you win the battle of politics. It's just not true."³⁰ One response to this reality check is that direct action, which has witnessed a sporadic coming and going amongst artists over the past century or more, is now emerging again as both institutional critique and identity politics have yielded little substantial change in the artworld. Thus we see today more and more acts of embodied resistance by artists taking place today in opposition to an entrepreneurial political economy in which a multitude of Master of Fine Arts (MFA)-credentialed art professionals vie for an ever thinner slice of the art market pie (valued at 47.42 billion euros in 2013).³¹

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What then has changed since the end of the cultural turn in 1989? And what is it about the social position of cultural producers that still makes their occasional involvement in direct action appear such a fraught and problematic retreat from “proper” artistic practice?

Throughout the post-war era, the influence that artists and other cultural producers felt they possessed helped empower them to focus on political and social circumstances not directly tied to their own professional working conditions. It was as if the passionate expression of a novelist, painter, playwright or musician, when amplified by the mass media, could stand on equal footing with statements issued by corporate chiefs or heads of state. Acting as public intellectuals, they demanded that national leaders, as well as museum directors, live up to democratic ideals. No doubt this sense of empowerment was also due to the prominent role that culture played in the Cold War itself. Recall the words of John F. Kennedy shortly before he was assassinated, which paved the way for the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts:

The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state... Artists are not engineers of the soul. It may be different elsewhere. But democratic society—in it, the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may.³²

³⁰ Pedro Lasch is writing in an email to me (March 15, 2015). Lasch was a participating artist in Gulf Labor's *52 Weeks* campaign, 2014.

³¹ Alexander Forbes, “TEFAF Art Market Report Says 2013 Best Year on Record Since 2007, With Market Outlook Bullish,” *artnetnews* (March 12, 2014), <http://tinyurl.com/mlvj6bx>.

³² President John F. Kennedy, Amherst College Convocation Address, October 26, 1963, transcribed by Amherst College Archives and Special Collections from the [audio recording](#) of

The “elsewhere” Kennedy referred to was, of course, the socialist bloc, and his assurances regarding absolute artistic freedom in the West were central to the ideological theater of the Cold War. Not surprisingly, state support for individual artists collapsed precipitously following the break-up of the USSR.

Of course, acts of solidarity between cultural producers and oppressed groups long preceded the wrenching realignment of the Cold War, but with a key difference: artists put their talent at the service of well-defined anti-capitalist political movements and parties. The involvement of early twentieth century artists in radical Left politics, including the founding of the Soviet Union but also in post-World War I Germany, is well known. More obscure, perhaps, is the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike and Pageant, in New Jersey, USA. Members of the International Workers of the World, including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and John Reed, joined forces with painter John Sloan and members of the Greenwich Village *avant-garde* to produce a large-scale spectacle in Madison Square Garden. The event included throngs of immigrant workers who reenacted scenes of factory life inside the New Jersey silk plant they were striking against. Participants called for support of the work stoppage with its demand for an eight-hour workday, but as strikers played themselves, police and industrialists simultaneously moved back and forth from theater rehearsals to actual picket lines.³³ After the formation of the Communist Party USA’s John Reed Clubs in the late 1920s, the involvement of artists and writers in organized political groupings came to pervade cultural life for the next decade. Convinced that artists were just another type of exploited laborer suffering from the chaos of capitalism’s 1929 collapse, Left Artists formed their own union in 1934. Painter Stuart Davis, one of its first presidents, declared that its members had “discovered their identity with the working class as a whole.”³⁴ In 1936, the American Artists Congress was founded as part of the Communist Party’s Popular Front, and sent an Artists and Writers Ambulance Corps to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

The great upheavals of the 1930s (and 1960s) resulted from extraordinary political and economic circumstances, and helped to create that existential bump which results in greater solidarity between populations most

JFK's speech:

https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/20032004_FallWinter/poet_president

³³ See “Chapter Nine: Blurring the Boundaries Between Art and Life,” in Nicolas Lampert, *A People’s History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

³⁴ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 87.

