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Art Worker, Art Worker, What Have you Done?
*From the dematerialization of art, to the materialization of
the neoliberal creative worker, 1968-1977*

Gregory Sholette 2020

From the book:

Lavoratori dell'arte, lavoratori dell'arte, che avete fatto? Dalla dematerializzazione dell'arte alla materializzazione del lavoratore creativo neoliberale 1968-1977, in Ilenia Caleo, Piersandra Di Matteo, Annalisa Sacchi (eds.), *In fiamme. La performance nello spazio delle lotte [1967-1979]*, Venice, Bruno, 2021, pp. 361-371.

They give you little bullshit amounts of money—wages and so forth—and then they steal all that shit back from you.

Kenneth Cockrell, 1970 ¹

The position of the artist in our society is exactly that of an assembly line worker in Detroit.

Carl Andre, 1976 ²

The proletarian once made himself into the worker, but now the process is inverted: the worker makes himself into the tertiary worker, the socialized worker, the proletarian worker...we have seen the mass worker (the first massive concretization of the capitalist abstraction of labor) produce the crisis.

Antonio Negri, 1975 ³

In her celebrated study *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson makes the claim that the 1970 New York Art Strike, together with the formation of Art Workers Coalition one year earlier, directly catalyzed the emergence of the “art worker” as a key figure within contemporary art in the United States.⁴ These actions, sought to replace the centuries-old ideal of the individual genius obsessed with *l'art pour l'art*, by using the coinage art worker. For some it merely de-romanticized the idea of the artist. For others it went so far as to represent a proletarian cultural laborer who as Karl Andre exclaimed was just like any other assembly line operator.⁵ Either way, this was by no means a completely new paradigm having first

¹ Kenneth Cockrell, member League of Revolutionary Black Workers speaking in the film *Finally Got the News*, 1970.

² David Bourdon, “Carl Andre Protests Museological ‘Mutilation,’” *Village Voice*, May 31, 1976. 118

³ Antonio Negri, “Proletarians and the State: Toward a Discussion of Worker’s Autonomy and the Historic Compromise,” reproduced in *Books For Burning*, Verso 2005, p 126.

⁴ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. University of California Press, 2011. P 2.

⁵ David Bourdon, note 1.

appeared during the Russian Revolution with Constructivist avant-garde, but also during the Great Depression of the 1930s when artists in the United States found employment through large-scale New Deal funded government programs.⁶ As salaried government workers these artists occasionally walked-off their jobs in search of better pay, and even engaged in acts of collective political protest.⁷

Among the key questions this paper seeks to address is why did the idea of the “art worker” return some thirty years later, especially given that both the economic and social conditions of the 1960s were so dissimilar to those of the 1930s (and also very different from post-1917 Russia). And what does this re-appearance, along with the seemingly paradoxical demand for the “dematerialization” of art, suggest about the changing nature of art, work, and capitalism in the decades just prior to the dismantling of the democratic welfare state? I am interested in these questions as they pertain to the 1.) nearly-global refusal of work (and other disciplinary norms) that took place between the 1960s and early 1980s (especially in the US and Italy); and 2.) how a certain optimism and re-reading of Marx via what Marcuse called the Great Refusal, and what Negri later described as Workers’ Autonomy, but what we might call in retrospect an “artification” of labor under capital gave way to intellectual and artistic pessimism in late 1970s New York amongst a small, though highly articulate cluster of artists’ collectives influenced by Conceptualism just before a neoliberalism embraces the art worker as the newly minted “creative” or “knowledge” worker who thinks “outside the box,” to save a floundering capitalism.

The mid-20th century adoption of the term “art worker” is especially unusual given that at the time only a small percentage of artists received direct support from the state, which made most artists more like independent business entrepreneurs than members of a unionized industrial workforce.⁸ Bryan-Wilson raises a third, even more compelling conundrum about the art worker, when she points out that this was a time when a significant number of artist’s –as well as students, workers, women and people of color– refused to behave as they were supposed to behave. Amongst artists, this was an act of refusal that called into question the very status of artistic labor as understood at the time.⁹ Her observation leads to a profound and fundamental paradox that Bryan-Wilson never fully addresses, but makes up the third question informing this essay: how could artists aspire to become members of the working class when the type of work that defined their very identity was in a process of simultaneous implosion (via Conceptualism’s deskilling of traditional artistic craft), and a contrary generalized expansion as the aforementioned “creative worker”?

While Bryan-Wilson recognizes this obvious enigma, she ultimately concludes that the very ambiguity found in the revised idiom of art worker provided artists in the 1960s and 1970s with a “flexible, if unstable and frequently contradictory, identity,” as well as a “framework in which to understand their production as politically meaningful, even vital.” Acknowledging the broader refusal taking place across society she also adds that the this new use of the phrase art worker emerged at a moment of massive transformation in the “value and meanings of “work” –and who counted as “workers.”¹⁰ This is a very generous, though also highly individual-centered reading of the art worker paradigm in so far as it focuses primarily on the benefits of such self-identification –or misidentification– for the further development of artistic exploration, rather than for collective

⁶ The best known of these programs was the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration that offered salaried positions to musicians, dancers, writers and visual artists who were frequently tasked with painting murals in municipal buildings around the country.

⁷ Details of this era are found in Chapter 7 of Andrew Hemingway’s study, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956*, Yale University Press, 2002

⁸ Between 1978 and 1980, approximately 500 artists in NYC received both wages and benefits through CETA, the Federally funded Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which in funded the NYC Cultural Council Foundation, this compares with more than 10,000 who were salaried by the government during the Great Depression in the 1930s.

⁹ Here the author is referring to forms of “making (and not making)” art associated with Conceptualism, process art, feminism and minimalism, Bryan-Wilson, p 4.

¹⁰ All citations are from Bryan-Wilson, p 217.

self-organizing amongst artists, something that was also taking place at an unusual pace given that as a category artists typically behave like discrete producers adverse to social cooperation.¹¹

As we know now, the contradictions, uncertainties and plasticity granted to the “art worker,” was soon being mobilized by capital for the extraction of value far beyond the factory walls. In the words of Brian Holmes this means that “art – or more broadly, “creativity” – has become the linchpin of the workfare system, in the financialized era of image and sign production.”¹² Let me assert now that as an artist, this bleak assessment brings no joy, seemingly leaving no way out by extinguishing the very possibility of cultural opposition. I will cautiously differ from this desolate outlook. For despite the almost complete disappearance of the welfare state in modern-day America, we continue to bear witness to a steady eruption of politically and socially engaged artist-identified projects, much like a spectral swarming of dark matter agencies, often localized in impact, though nevertheless unceasing in frequency as a relentless challenge to the cheerful façade of mainstream enterprise culture.¹³

Periodically this dissent also flares-up into a grand mass of collective negation, just as it did during the counter-globalization demonstrations of the 1990s, the Occupy Movement a decade later, in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 US and UK elections, or most recently with the surge of decolonizing direct actions waged against racist public monuments, boycotts of “toxic” museum board members, and the spreading unionization drive amongst actual “art workers” employed by cultural institutions such as the LA Museum of Contemporary Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the New Museum.¹⁴ How then do we make sense of the apparent contradiction whereby the Great Refusal of the 1960s and 1970s gives birth to a highly deregulated and privatizing neoliberal enterprise culture as the figure of the art worker was being expanded to become the model for all forms of work in the creative economy?¹⁵

To fully address these questions with any level of detail would require going well-beyond the scope of this short paper. I will, however, attempt to enrich the discussion for future research by first sketching out one aspect of this history in which a radical transformation rooted in autonomous collective agency appeared briefly possible, rather than the hyper-consumerism of the post-welfare state that today surrounds and swallows us. This tantalizing *alternative* or *speculative genealogy* is followed by a brief overview of the refusal by artists to work like artists in the 1960s and 1970s. After that, I conclude with a short synopsis focused on one specific artists’ group that operated as an editorial collective in New York City just as the era of the Great Refusal was giving way to the revival of *laissez faire* capitalism in the 1980s. This group, *Red-Herring*, definitely grasped the political significance of the changes taking place at the time, and yet just as certainly reflected these extremes by promulgating a severe, and at times merciless self-analysis, quite unlike the more buoyant “art workers” of the

¹¹ Perhaps this assessment also helps explain why the bulk of *Art Workers* focuses on case studies about Hans Haacke, Lucy R. Lippard, Carl Andre and Robert Morris, four individuals who played leading roles in the cultural collectivism of the late 1960s and 1970s, without attempting an analysis of artistic collectivism itself. Another unintentional effect of this focus on personal case studies however is to further bolster the existing cultural obsession with art stars and art geniuses.

¹² Brian Holmes, *A Rising Tide of Contradiction: Museums in the Age of the Expanding Workfare State*. European institute for progressive cultural policies, 2004 accessed online at: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0504/holmes/en>

¹³ See Gregory Sholette, *Dark matter: Art and politics in the age of enterprise culture*, Pluto Press, 2011.

¹⁴ Catherine Wagley, “Museum Workers Across the Country Are Unionizing...”, November 25, 2019, *artnetnes*: <https://news.artnet.com/market/union-museum-analysis-1714716>

¹⁵ For an excellent overview of this situation see: Martha Rosler, “The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation,” *e-flux journal* #33, March 2012: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/33/68311/the-artistic-mode-of-revolution-from-gentrification-to-occupation/>

previous decade.¹⁶ *Red-Herring*'s nearly melancholic mindset reflected an uncanny, seemingly unresolvable prefiguration of things to come. Nonetheless, things still came.

From Detroit to Italy: A “Great Refusal”

They give you little bullshit amounts of money—wages and so forth—and then they steal all that shit back from you in terms of the way they have their other thing set up, that old credit-stick-‘em-up gimmick society—consumer credit—buy shit, buy shit—on credit... They are motherfucking, nonproducing, non-existing bastards dealing with paper... It is these motherfuckers who deal with intangibles who are rewarded by this society. The more abstract and intangible your service, the bigger the reward.¹⁷

The 1960s and 1970s was a time of bottom-up rebellion. Not only by women, people of color, queers and students, but also amongst a younger, often non-White generation of industrial workers in the US. This includes the militant Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement or DRUM, one of several autonomous workers' collectives formed in 1968 primarily by African-American automobile employees at the Chrysler assembly plant in Detroit, Michigan. In July of that year, DRUM initiated an unauthorized labor walk-out, which soon spread to other auto-making facilities. A year later, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers LRBW was founded as a coordinating organization and cultural front actively publishing a radical newspaper and generating the unflinchingly anti-capitalism film *Finally Got the News* (cited above). The League's politics sought to link these wildcat strikes with the New Communist theories of revolutionary and post-colonial Marxism-Leninism.¹⁸ In Italy's industrial North, almost simultaneously, masses of workers initiated their own unprecedented wildcat strikes during a period that came to be known as the Hot Autumn (*Autunno caldo*).

Crippled by these job actions the Mirafiori FIAT auto plant in Turin became the site of a unique, cross-Atlantic attempt at cross-pollinating radical, anti-capitalist activism when members of LRBW and other Detroit based radicals traveled to Italy to discover new activist tactics such as pirate radio, and where they were also exposed to notions of autonomous Marxism associated with Antonio Negri among other theorists.¹⁹ Still, this exchange of ideas seems to have had limited influence in the US context at this time. For although American radicals, like their Italian compatriots, were turning away from established Communist and Trotskyist Parties, engaging in illegal wildcat strikes and calling for workers' power, the US New Left sought inspiration not from this worker-centered interpretation of Marxism, but from within the post-colonial Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese Cultural Revolutions.²⁰ Undoubtedly, the historical agency of revolutionary transformation was being reimagined not as

¹⁶ Possibly taking its cue from the Cultural Revolution, there is a reference in the second issue of *Red-Herring* to the “Speak Bitterness” sessions in Maoist China whereby any lingering bourgeois attitudes were called out in public for criticism or punishment.

¹⁷ Cockrel.

¹⁸ For more on the New Communist movement see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the air: Sixties radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. Verso Books, 2018. It would also be a serious oversite to ignore the non-Marxist anarchist and pacifist radicalism of the era, see for instance Nandini Bagechee's excellent comment “collectivity, a phenomenon that was previously associated with organized labor party politics, was interpreted by anti-institutional activists and artists in its anarchic communitarian dimension,” in *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side*, Fordham Univ Press, 2018.

¹⁹ Negri is joined here by the Italian theorists Mario Tronti, Paolo Virno and Franco Berardi, meanwhile, similar theories emerged in 1960s France, for example post-Situationist theorist Henri Lefebvre references the term *autogestion* for workers self-management of industry, the word became a rallying cry for student and worker demonstrations in Paris, May 1968.

²⁰ To see a vertiginous and not necessarily unbiased genealogy of post-war US Left groups and factions navigate to: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-3/chart.pdf>

the white, male industrial laborer, but as a subaltern cultural subject, a shift of agency that may help explain the desolate outlook of the *Red-Herring* artists' collective a decade later, as we shall see.²¹

As the 1970s wore on, both the relative economic plentitude of the post-war economy, especially in the US, but also the optimism expressed by pop songs such as Thunderclap Newman's "Something in the Air," began turning cloudy as twin recessions blunted the optimism of 1968.²² On October 29th, 1975, American President Gerald Ford famously refused to offer federal assistance to an almost completely bankrupt New York City. Both DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers collapsed from a combination of mass layoffs in the auto industry, and fractious internal ideological disputes. Whereas in Italy, the Hot Autumn of 1969-1970 set the stage for the still more radical Movement of 1977, as well as the formation of *Autonomia Operaia*, both a political grouping and a set of theories breaking with mainstream Communist Party hierarchies to advocate instead for a "bottom up" self-organization among workers freed from the leadership of state governance, trade unions, and established Left politics. Nevertheless, as previously stated, very little of this new Autonomist Marxist theory appears to have influenced US based Leftists, or artists for that matter.²³ The situation in New York City was especially grim for low-income and working people both white and of color.

On October 29th, 1975, American President Gerald Ford famously refused to offer federal assistance to an almost completely bankrupt New York City. A day later the front-page headline of the city's Daily News tabloid paper appeared to shout: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD." Though Ford did not use these exact words, his intentions were clear. Other city papers underscored the unprecedented nature of this fiscal punishment as many see this historical moment to be the first salvo of the neoliberal war on the poor, ultimately leading to the privatizing of formerly public assets, residential displacement and the current acceleration of city-wide gentrification. Only after mass layoffs and wage cuts humbled the City's public unions as libraries and public hospitals either closed down or were heavily defunded, and New York's initially free university system was forced to charge tuition, only then did capital begin to flow back to an indebted metropolis now being marched into a state of punishing economic austerity.

This harsh disciplinary maneuver contrasts sharply with the rapid and extreme expansion of neoliberal lifestyle branding that soon followed in the next decade. Though in truth, this celebration of dissident cultural consumerism had already been tested in the 1960s as counter-cultural trends were appropriated within a growing stream of fashion, music and other obligatory accessories of post-war capitalism. The 1970s saw its own countering of that commodification in the Punk and DIY (Do It Yourself) movements, though these too would fall prey to capitalist branding and spectacularization soon enough. Nevertheless, with the dawn of the 1980s, the Situationist International-inspired slogan "Take your desires for reality!" was undeniably being absorbed into a new and clandestine capitalist campaign, as the rebellious cool of May 1968 was conquered by the expanding marketplace. Even radicalized fine art practitioners fell prey to this new cultural paradigm, as they first appeared resistant, then agonized, and finally seduced by a fascination with the *communism of capital*, a

²¹ Art & Language did participate in the 1976 Venice Biennale, and group members were exposed to the radical critique Italian theorists were developing in relationship to both mainstream Marxism, and to the Communist Party's centralized politics and unions, but this knowledge does not appear to have led to any sustained discourse or reevaluation of the relationship between art and politics within the US or UK collectives under discussion here. The group's Venice project is touched upon in Robert Bailey's dissertation, *ART & LANGUAGE AND THE POLITICS OF ART WORLDS, 1969-1977*, University of Pittsburgh, 2012: 1977 http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/11494/1/ETD_Template_Robert_Bailey.pdf

²² "The revolution's here, and you know that it's right," lyrics from "Something in the Air" by Thunderclap Newman, 1969.

²³ This began to change after the publication of "Autonomia: post-political politics" in 1980 by the journal *semiotext (e)*, a special issue containing contributions by among others, Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Franco Berardi among others, some Italian theorists incarcerated for allegedly assisting the armed struggle of the Italian Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*): Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, "Autonomia: post-political politics, *semiotext (e)*." *New York* (1980).

phrase Paolo Virno uses to describe the moment when capitalism “hijacked ideas traditionally considered communist and morphed them into something recognizable yet uncanny.”²⁴

In spreading wildcat strikes, in the militant strategy of factory occupations, in the attitude and demands of young workers, the protest reveals a rebellion against the whole of working conditions imposed, against the whole performance to which one is condemned.

Herbert Marcuse, 1972²⁵

Loosely tied to one another by their overlapping membership, but also by a deepening skepticism towards cultural institutions, and a shared attraction to the “dematerializing” of the work of art itself, a series of interconnected artists’ publishing collectives arose in the late 1960s with one common characteristic above all others: a refusal to perform the role or labor of the artist as it was understood at the time. This artistic withdrawal was built upon assertions by Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler and their now canonical 1967 text asserting that the contemporary artist’s studio was fast becoming “a study” in which art objects would likely become “wholly obsolete.”²⁶ What this meant for the early conceptual artist Victor Burgin was a proposed “moratorium on *things* — a temporary withdrawal from real objects during which the object analogue formed in consciousness may be examined as the origin of a new generating system.”²⁷ For minimalist Robert Morris it was more political. Discussing the 1970 New York Art Strike Morris co-organized he insisted this act of artistic negation was “intended to underscore the need I and others feel to shift priorities at this time from art making and viewing to unified action within the art community against the intensifying conditions of repression, war and racism in this country.”²⁸ However, even before the Art Strike took place, Lippard commented plaintively in 1973, “hopes that ‘conceptual art’ would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively ‘progressive’ approach of modernism, were for the most part unfounded.”²⁹

All in all, it was still a heady moment and a time when it seemed that an entire generation of dissidents embraced not the image of the noble, exploited laborer of the 1920s and 1930s, but the rebellious artist who

²⁴ See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, University of Chicago Press, 1998 and Armin Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz “The Communism of Capital?,” *ephemera* 13, no. 3 (2013), pp 483-495: <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/contribution/13-3editorial.pdf>

²⁵ Marcuse from *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 1972, cited in Julia Bryan-Wilson’s *Art workers: Radical practice in the Vietnam War era*. Univ of California Press, 2011. P 34

²⁶ Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler made their influential declaration that art was in a process of becoming obsolete in an essay penned in 1967 entitled “The dematerialization of art” and published the next year in *Art international* 12, no. 2 (1968): 31-36.

²⁷ Victor Burgin, “Thanks for the Memory,” *Architectural Design*, 40, August 1970, pp. 288- 92.

²⁸ Morris is cited by Gabriel Mindel Saloman in her article, “On Hiatus: The Imminent Impossibility of the Art Strike, The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest, No 9, Sumer 2014: <https://joap.org/issue9/mindelartstrike.htm#sdendnote15sym> The 1970 New York Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression was organized by artists William Morris and Poppy Johnson. In 1977 Gustav Metzger called for a three-year art work stoppage, a similar call was made by Goran Đord-ević in 1979, and on January 20, 2017 artists carried out a one-day withdrawal from art practice and museum going as part a broader walkout of schools and business called for to protest the inauguration of President Donald Trump. See: John Bowles, “The 1970 New York Artists’ Strike that Prefigured #J20,” January 18, 2017, Hyperallergic: <https://hyperallergic.com/352184/the-1970-new-york-artists-strike-that-prefigured-j20/>

²⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), new postface 1973 p. xxi, also see: <http://theoria.art-zoo.com/postface-to-six-years-lucy-lippard/>

rejected “the whole performance to which one is condemned.”³⁰ For artists, the Great Refusal brought on a new level of political self-consciousness. Previously, imagining themselves to be autonomous, and therefore organically a non-capitalist class faction, starting in the 1960s, a growing number of artists began seeing art and its institutions to be in league with an establishment that was vigorously opposed by Civil Rights leaders, feminists, gay liberation activists, Chicano and Puerto Rican dissidents, as well as angry students forced into battle against peasants in Southeast Asian. Both the practice that came to known as “Institutional Critique,” and the concept of the “art worker” discussed above, are responses to this self-reflection on what Theodor Adorno described as the “Culture Industry.”³¹ Still, we should not miss the irony that it was the image of the artist as a type of worker, rather than as a visionary or social outcast, that permitted some artists to re-imagine their role as socially useful, even as other workers expressed longing to be more like artists.³²

But by the late 1970s, the critical stimulus that led to this critical refusal in which artists rejected their traditional roles as object makers, had either run its course, or was being confronted with an altogether different socio-economic and cultural paradigm unlike that which had given birth to these same sentiments a decade earlier. The result was an intensive, even crippling level of self-doubt that concluded years of artistic critical discourse by a cluster of inter-related editorial collectives that included: 1.) *Art & Language* (A&L), founded in 1969 and most active in the UK with extensions in both the US and Australia, and active until about 1982 (the group has been known to alter its founding dates to 1967). 2.) *The Fox* editorial team that emerged as a dissident, and more overtly political New York-based City subgroup of *Art & Language*, publishing a journal of the same name between 1974 and 1976.³³ 3.) *Artists Meeting for Cultural Change* (AMCC), a coalition group founded in 1975 that explicitly challenged the exclusion of women and non-white artists from the upcoming Whitney Museum Bicentennial Exhibition, finally publishing a John Berger-inspired critique of American Art History in 1977 as a protest publication entitled *An Anti-Catalog*. And finally, 4.) the briefly constituted, journal-based cadre known as *Red-Herring* (1977 -1978), who will serve as the concluding focus of my essay, and which, despite its inner-struggles as outlined below, positively served as one of several key influences on Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) in the following decade (1980-1988).³⁴

³⁰ Marcuse, previously cited, Also note “Art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal– the protest against that which is.” Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press, 2nd Edition, 1991. p 63.

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, 1977.

³² Researchers Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello go so far as to argue that the neoliberal creative economy modeled itself on the “anarchic” work habits of artists of the 1960s, see: Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007.

³³ Among the many contributors to *The Fox* included artists Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden, Michael Corris, Joseph Kosuth, Sarah Charlesworth, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Lizzie Borden, May Stevens, Martha Rosler, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge among many others, see Specific Object: https://specificobject.com/objects/info.cfm?object_id=3136#.YY1m-b3MJpQ – The Fox was sardonically described by artist Jeff Wall as a project of “bureaucratic immobilization.” Jeff Wall, “Draft for ‘Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel’” in *Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 11-30. Cited in Kim Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics: Art, Crisis and Neoliberalism*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury.

³⁴ Outside New York in the 1970s one also found the London-based publication *Black Phoenix* focused on “third world” and anti-imperialist culture and *Left Curve* out of San Francisco which addressed art from a Marxist cultural perspective. For more details about the organizations and their journals that I mention here see: Michael Corris, “inside a new York art gang: selected documents of art & language, New York in Stimson and Albero’s *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, MIT, 2004; Julie Ault ed., *Alternative art, New York, 1965-1985: a cultural politics book for the Social Text Collective*. U of Minnesota Press, 2002; Robert Baily, *Art & language international: conceptual art between art worlds*. Duke University Press, 2016; and Chris Gilbert, “Art & Language and the Institutional Form in Anglo-American Collectivism,” Chapter 3 in Stimson and Sholette, *Collectivism After Modernism*, Minnesota, 2006. Meanwhile, PDF copies of some of these publications are available online at: <http://darkmatterarchives.net>

The Struggle Against the “Self”³⁵

Many artists are, for many reasons, organizing themselves into “groups”, “unions, communalities, or perhaps just talking possibilities. But, for the most part, “organization” has no particular significance per se. No aspiring “rank and file” –high-culture-social-section-alliance can be realistic if its principles of organization fail to take into account the class historical nature of the process it is initiating.

Red-Herring Collective 1977 ³⁶

Red-Herring’s editorial collective consisted of six artists previously associated with *The Fox* journal including Karl Beveridge, Ian Burn, Carole Condé, Michael Corris, Preston Heller, Andrew Menard, Nigel Lendon, and Jill Breakstone. The project was itself a factional split with *The Fox* editorial group, but also followed the collapse of Art & Language New York. Above all, *Red-Herring* sought from issue number one in 1977 to challenge the art community’s sense of entitlement, or as Beveridge and Condé maintained in their biting comic from a couple of years earlier; no matter how much Marx or Mao you have read, “It’s Still Privileged Art.”³⁷ Quite likely, *Red-Herring*’s extreme self-critique was itself a response to the lingering intellectual sting experienced when British A&L members Michael Baldwin and Philip Pilkington dismissed *The Fox* editorial collective as a bunch of “lumpenbourgeoisie.” Theorist Kim Charnley points out that this “withering conceptual art joke” makes both a searing reference to Marx’s social category the ‘lumpenproletariat,’ as well as,

The artists’ colony then growing in the abandoned loft spaces of the formerly light-industrial district of SoHo, downtown New York... Art&Language UK saw in the politicized turn of 1970s New York, the appropriation of revolutionary motifs drawn from Marxism into the discourse of artists who had not troubled to examine their own class position.” ³⁸

As cited above, the very act of collectively organizing required a recognition of one’s class position, even if that meant that,

There may be little we can do to stop this magazine from becoming another coffee-table class diversion; there is much we can do to make sure that isn’t all it becomes. ³⁹

Curiously, *Red-Herring*’s class-based analysis was actively imagining the radicalization of culture from within a state funded culture industry, just as that entire top-down structure was about to crumble under attack by Republican conservatives initiating a series of so-called culture wars, but perhaps more decisively by the privatization agenda of ultra-free market economy.

³⁵ *Red-Herring* #2, 1978, and most likely a reference to the “Speak Bitterness” sessions of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in which lingering bourgeois attitudes were called-out in public for criticism or punishment.

³⁶ *Red-Herring* #1, 1977, p 1, see: <http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Red-Herring-Jan77.pdf>

³⁷ Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *It's Still Privileged Art*. Art Gallery of Ontario, 1976.

³⁸ Charnley.

³⁹ “Red Herring is aimed at the petty bourgeoisie, in the main it is about the petty bourgeoisie, it is done entirely by the petty bourgeoisie and still some comrades hold that it is ‘an expression of the working class,’ from a draft editorial “The Petty Bourgeoisie and the Class Struggle.”

As artists are becoming increasingly organized by the State, both as wage laborers (by such programs as C.E.T.A.⁴⁰) and in terms of their accountability for production to “cultural” agencies and institutions, there arises the possibility for developing new organization forms of political and ideological solidarity with the working class in the struggle for socialism.⁴¹

The double irony of this particular line of analysis is that not only was *Red-Herring* itself being funded by the same state and municipal foundations they critiqued, including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the aforementioned C.E.T.A., but they envisioned cultural resistance vertically structured as a unionizable labor force, and less as petite bourgeois entrepreneurs, thus missing entirely the potential of horizontal self-organizing that came to the forefront in the 1990s, especially with Tactical Media.⁴²

Perhaps recognizing something was not quite right with this, by issue number two, the *Red-Herring* collective shifted its focus to what they perceived to be a newly emergent intensity of organized class struggle. The 1978 issue had much less to say about the art world and instead reproduced lyrics from an Appalachian Miner’s Song, an anti-racist poem “White Man” by Langston Hughes that was first published in the CPUSA’s *New Masses* in 1936, provided documentation of anti-Shah student group actions, and ran an extended historical text entitled “Art and Unions in the U.S.” (though the editors only partially endorsed this essay due to its criticism of the New Left Marxist-Leninist movement). This time the group’s editorial ratcheted-down its self-criticism in an effort express support for,

A genuine Communist movement is beginning to fill the void left by the bankrupt CPUSA [Communist Party USA], and though a single, anti-revisionist Party has not been formed yet, there is new motion to build this Party. At the same time, genuine Communists are beginning to lead the anti-imperialist and union movements again, lead the struggle against national and sexual oppression and other forms of class exploitation...The editors of *Red-Herring* would like to express our solidarity with this motion to build class struggle, and with proletarian culture as a specific weapon of class struggle.⁴³

Still, not able to completely leave the quandary of their own class situation alone, the editorial goes on to insist that the problem with the first issue of *Red-Herring* was that the collective “ended up talking almost exclusively to the audience of the New York art world.” They even considered rejecting the name of the journal because it revealed a cynical, artistic attitude.⁴⁴ The new group also promised to achieve a “fusion with the masses,” and insisted that the next issue of the journal would be filled with truly proletarian cultural expressions, calling on readers to submit theoretical works, poetry and fiction. But *Red-Herring* Issue Number Three never actually materialized, at least not under that name. Towards the end of 1977 Condé and Beveridge moved back to Toronto, thus truly distancing themselves from the New York art scene.⁴⁵ At this point the already small

⁴⁰ C.E.T.A (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) was established by Republican President Richard Nixon in 1973 tasked with providing training and jobs to unemployed Americans (including artists) during the recession of the 1970s. It was drastically cut-back and then completely eliminated by President Ronald Regan in 1982.

⁴¹ *Red-Herring* # 1, 1977, p 26.

⁴² On the masthead of *Red-Herring* the group acknowledges funding from the NEA and NYSCA (New York State Council for the Arts).

⁴³ *Red-Herring* #2, 1978 p 1.

⁴⁴ After all, irony is an educated linguistic trope, however in the previous journal the group caustically wrote that, “what we are doing should, like everything else “made-in-New York”, be regarded in many was as yet another red-herring,” editorial from *Red-Herring*, Issue One, 1977, p 2.

⁴⁵ Group member Michal Corris describes the departure of Condé and Beveridge (and presumably the likely end of *Red-Herring*) as bittersweet in Stimson and Albero’s anthology. Another useful source about the practice of *Red-Herring* members Condé and Beveridge is: Dot Tuer, “Is It Still Privileged Art? The Politics of Class and Collaboration in the Art Practice of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge.” *But is it art* 7 (1995): 195-220.

collective had split into even tinier factions with at least one member of the collective –Andrew Menard– now working in collaboration with poet, activist and former Black Nationalist turned Marxist, Amiri Baraka’s Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU) by helping to establish *Main Trend*, another short-lived magazine.⁴⁶

Conclusions

I think the art Leftists were trying to make a clear statement of intention. We were disaffected with the direction of mainstream culture and fine art, and wanted to join our art directly with change-oriented politics. There was an emerging scene of academic Leftism in art, such as that of the AMCC [Artists Meeting for Cultural Change] leadership, and we wanted to distinguish our efforts from those “petite bourgeois” art world professionals. We wanted to put more on the line, risk more, and join the action in the streets. Those groups in the mid-to-late 1970s Lower East Side scene, including Artists for Survival, EL Bohio, COLAB, Group Material, and others were part of what informed PAD/D’s beginnings. Jerry Kearns, 2007.⁴⁷

What so clearly infused the debates circulating within *Red-Herring*, and other Left cultural groups in New York City at the end of the 1970s, was a sense that the ambiguity, flexibility and privilege allowed for by the term “art worker” just a decade earlier, had now become inescapably divisive and farcical. The very idea that artists suffered from exploitation just as an assembly line worker was absurd. And yet, there remained a narrow hope that artists might still serve as cultural allies to those truly in a state of struggle, including especially anti-colonial and anti-imperialist revolutionaries, as well as African Americans and other oppressed people of color trapped inside the “belly of the best.”

That is not to say that these largely internalized struggles led to a terminal dead end for these inquiries. If for no other reason, it was largely out of these same ideological discussions, as well as the actual commingling of artists and Left cultural coalitions throughout the 1970s, that a new phase of artists’ collectives took shape in the early 1980s including Group Material and Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D). Together they began to reimagine a role for artists who wished to align with global anti-capitalist and liberation struggles, but doing so with far less concern for the ultimately debilitating self-criticism ingrained within *Red-Herring*.⁴⁸ As PAD/D co-founder Jerry Kearns, who was a contributor to *Red-Herring* #2 observed, “although we didn’t receive much credit in the mainstream, I think we and the other groups of the late 1970s were fuel for the political art boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s.”⁴⁹ PAD/D, in turn would face its own theoretical and political challenges as it confronted the unexpected Rightward shift within the US working class, as well as an organized reaction against the Leftward inflection of 1960s counter-culture.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Main Trend* ran from 1978 to 1981 according to Robert Baily, op. cit. note 26.

⁴⁷ Kearns was a co-founding member of PAD/D in 1980, and was previously active with the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union (AICU), Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) and contributed writings to *Red-Herring*. The citation here is excerpted from the booklet *Group Work*, by the collective Temporary Services, (Printed Matter Books, 2007). p. 88.

⁴⁸ Gregory Sholette, “A Collectography of PAD/D. Political Art Documentation and Distribution: A 1980’s Activist Art and Networking Collective.” 2011 (an updated version of this essay is forthcoming in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*, Lesley E. Shipley and Mey-Yen Moriuchi, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁴⁹ Kearns, note 45.

⁵⁰ See: Sholette, “Interventionist Art in an Age of Enterprise Culture,” published in the special issue “Arte y revolución” *Brumaria* (journal), Spain, for *Dokumenta 12 Magazine*, Kassel, Germany, Nov 23 2007, pp. 115 – 132.

One thing is clear, however, from this dive into the surplus archive of oppositional culture, Red-Herring collective's agonizing efforts to make art that really mattered politically, while not making it naively or in vain was simultaneously a profound and painful struggle, as well as something of a lost opportunity at a moment when the coming mainstreaming of political art several years later in the late 1980s might just have taken a very different, less complicit path forwards.⁵¹ All in all, this is a complex and indeed often contradictory legacy that deserves more and deeper research than provided here, including a precise understanding of how these critical debates taking place on the cusp of neoliberalization inform the far more naked contradictions of what I deem to call our bare art world.⁵²

⁵¹ For a fresh interpretation of Red-Herring and other related collectives see Kim Charnley's forthcoming book: *Sociopolitical Aesthetics: Art, Crisis and Neoliberalism*, Bloomsbury publishing, 2020.

⁵² "An art world where the interweaving of art and capitalism is self-evident," writes Kim Charnley in "Art on the Brink: "Bare Art" and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy," an introduction to Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and resistance: Activist art and the crisis of capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.