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A COLLECTOGRAPHY OF PAD/D, A 1980S ACTIVIST ART COLLECTIVE, AND ITS LEGACY IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ACTIVIST ART AND SCHOLARSHIP

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This exhibition is the first in a series of socially concerned art intended to expand international communication and to form an archive of political art. Anyone interested in participating in future manifestations should contact Lucy R. Lippard, 138 Prince St. NYC 10012 (Figure 1.1).

Announcement for the exhibition, “Some British Art From the Left,” curated by Lucy R. Lippard for Artists Space NYC, June 16–July 14, 1979.¹

Our goal is to provide artists with an organized relationship to society, to demonstrate the political effectiveness of image making, and to provide a framework within which progressive artists can discuss and develop alternatives to the mainstream art system.

Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) Mission Statement 1981²

What started as a straightforward call to establish an archive of politically committed art wound up instigating an ambitious new artists’ collective. A decade before the emergence of the world wide web and prior to the introduction of the personal computer, one organization of artists and activists sought to produce a networked, parallel arena in which to nurture, theorize, display and distribute creative practices opposed to, or simply desperate to be something other than, capitalist culture. It began officially during a meeting called together in the Winter of 1980 by the art critic Lucy R. Lippard, and the naming of the project Political Art Documentation (PAD). However, months prior to this gathering, informal discussions about creating an archive and a larger organization had taken place starting the summer earlier. It was then, in June of 1979, that Lippard decided to use the back side of a mailed invitation card announcement for her exhibition “Some British Art from the Left” to invite those interested in political art to gather and plan the formation of an archive of socially engaged art. By using the printed postal invite as an organizing tool, Lippard effectively set in motion the emergence of not merely an archive, but a new activist art collective, which was not what she had anticipated. She also transgressed her own, presumed curatorial disengagement in

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order to enter the arena of activism, and not for the first or the last time, a point I return to below. This essay provides an overview of the group's approximately seven years of activity, as well as some reflections on its legacy for the new and increasingly expansive wave of activist art we are witnessing at the start of the 21st century.

From Archive to Activist Art Organization in the Course of One Evening

February 24, 1980, New York City, New York: fifty or so artists, writers, and veteran political activists gather in response to Lucy R. Lippard's call to, "form an [international] archive of political art."³ Lippard's planned agenda was to explore ways of organizing her swelling collection of documents about art with political intent, and investigate ways to make this material available to other artists in search of models for politicizing their own art practice. The meeting took place at Printed Matter Book Store, then located on Lispenard Street in downtown Manhattan. Lippard's plea to not found another organization was soon disregarded and the rest of the story forms a chapter in the unknown history of collective, activist art that is gradually being excavated by a new generation of scholars, historians, curators, and interested artists.⁴

I attended the meeting in search of an intellectual and creative community that held similar beliefs about the place of art within a broader movement of progressive, social transformation. Having recently graduated from The Cooper Union School of Art where I studied with Hans Haacke, what I discovered that evening was a group of cultural workers who, rather than merely discussing their own art or career, eagerly debated issues of racism, sexism, and corporate criminality in the US, along with ending apartheid in South Africa, and opposing the stationing of US "tactical" nuclear weapons in Europe. What I did not know then, however, was the degree to which this encounter would alter the direction of my career as well as my life. Before the end of that February evening a new artists' collective had been conceived, named, and given a mission. Present that evening was Clive Philpot, then the Director of the Museum of Modern Art Library. Philpot christened the project Political Art Documentation or PAD. But in the months ahead the new group experienced a minor split within its ranks. Contemplating the many thankless chores required to service other artists, including archiving, cataloging and cross-referencing their work, the membership expressed a strong desire to produce its own, collectively authored art. Sometime later in 1980 or early 1981, the 'D' for Distribution was adopted by the group, thus transforming PAD into PAD/D. In the immodest language typical of the period, the group's mission sought to "build an international, grass roots network of artist/activists who will support with their talents and their political energies the liberation and self-determination of all disenfranchised peoples."⁵

Within a year of its founding PAD/D was making art, as well as building its archive, but also programming public events, networking with other organizations, making portable political artworks for demonstrations (Figure 1.2), posting a calendar of radical cultural events taking place in New York City called Red Letter Days, as well as renting a small office, devising fundraising ideas, and publishing a newsletter initially named *1st Issue*, but soon renamed *Upfront* after it became apparent that too many issues of *1st Issue* would be confounding. In sum, it would not be unfair to describe the driving force behind this frenetic, multileveled activity as a desire to unilaterally reconstruct the entire, corrupted world of bourgeois art from the bottom up. As the group put it in the first newsletter: "PAD [/D] can not serve as a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art."⁶

To achieve this grand objective, the group began developing plans for an organization of even larger size and complexity: a national or perhaps even international network of like-minded activist artists working in concert with non-art, progressive activists. If PAD/D's

immediate goal was to organize a highly fractured, post-1968 counter-culture, the group's larger vision sought to bring into being a bona-fide counter-hegemonic or oppositional public sphere. Woven from equal parts recovered genealogies (from the PAD/D archival materials) and politically sympathetic exhibition outlets (university galleries, labor unions, community centers, even church halls), this longed-for, counter-hegemony was, more than anything else, the feature that set PAD/D apart from other, self-organized, art collectives then or since.

The high stakes PAD/D placed on networking artists with activists are instantly apparent if one examines the diverse topics touched-upon in its monthly, public dialog series known as Second Sundays. First held at Printed Matter Books and later moved to the Franklin Furnace a few blocks away, a sample list of Second Sunday evenings from 1981 includes: The History of Abortion Rights; Civil Liberties and Domestic Surveillance; War Tax Evasion; Unauthorized Art in Public Spaces; Hispanic Culture and Struggle and Art and Ecological Issues. In addition, the group's public platform presented issues related to Art Education, Native American art and one evening hosted by Lucy Lippard and Jerry Kearns that celebrated what they described as the culture of "The Street." As much as these programs sought to connect artists with progressive activists however, they were also intended to prove to activists the political value of art, a challenge that has become somewhat less difficult in decades since following the highly visible role of artists in the counter-globalization movement, Arab Spring, and Occupy Movements.

On February 26, 1982, two years and two days from its inaugural meeting at Printed Matter, PAD/D hosted a sizable gathering of activists and artists at the Bread & Roses, 1199 Health and Hospital Workers Union Hall on West 43rd Street in New York City. Timed to conflict with the College Art Association's Conference, the "February 26th Movement" as it was called, brought together dozens of organizations and individuals ranging from Los Angeles-based, Social and Public Art Resources, or SPARC, to local participants including Group Material. It also featured presentations by several energetic if comparatively politically ambiguous alternative spaces including, Fashion Moda from the Bronx and ABC No Rio from the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As PAD/D member Keith Christensen explains, he went to the February 26th conference after learning about it from *The Village Voice* and discovered an alternative path for an artist to take that integrated his political and artistic sensibilities. Christensen soon found himself working with PAD/D to re-design *Upfront*. And while the newsletter would indeed become a platform for the dissemination of activist culture, the larger goal of a sustainable, progressive cultural network eluded the group. Yet, if the group's overconfidence and sense of political mission led it at times to outstrip its own resources, PAD/D's collective, organizational verve nevertheless out-performed many other, more traditionally structured and better funded cultural institutions, including many self-proclaimed alternative spaces.

Perhaps PAD/D's success at organizing artists, a denomination typically antagonistic to administrative rules and institutional discipline, appears somewhat less remarkable if one takes into account the background of the group's initial membership between 1980 and 1982. Lucy R. Lippard, for example, was not only a noted arts writer, but she was also an activist and accomplished organizer who participated in the founding of the feminist art collective Heresies, Ad-Hoc Women Artists, and Printed Matter Books. Perhaps as many as two-thirds of PAD/D's early membership in fact brought with them previous experience working with other cultural collectives, institutions, or programs. Along with the aforementioned Clive Philpot of MoMA, PAD/D's organizational

A Collectography of PAD/D and Its Legacy

assets included veterans of the Art Workers Coalition or AWC, Fluxus, Cultural Correspondence, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change or AMCC, Collaborative Projects or Colab, Red-Herring, Amiri Baraka's Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union; The Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee or NAPNOC (later renamed the Alliance for Cultural Democracy or ACD); The Women's Building and Angry Arts. In addition, several PAD/D members simultaneously belonged to other, recently formed artists' collectives such as Group Material, World War III Illustrated, and Carnival Knowledge.

Nevertheless, in order to accomplish so much in such a short period of time – essentially between 1980 and 1985 in terms of the group's most significant work – the members of PAD/D devoted many hours of in-kind, unpaid labor. What actual cash revenue was raised went to cover the rent and publication costs but never labor. And money did come as well, primarily in the form of cash donations from sympathetic artists including Hans Haacke, Leon Golub, Jenny Holzer, Nancy Spero, Barbara Kruger and, even on one occasion, Julian Schnabel. Funds were also generated through the call for modest dues as well as through benefit events, including one that I organized at Club 57 on St. Marks Place with very mixed success that featured the late artist David Wojnarowicz and his band Three Teens Kill Four No Motive.

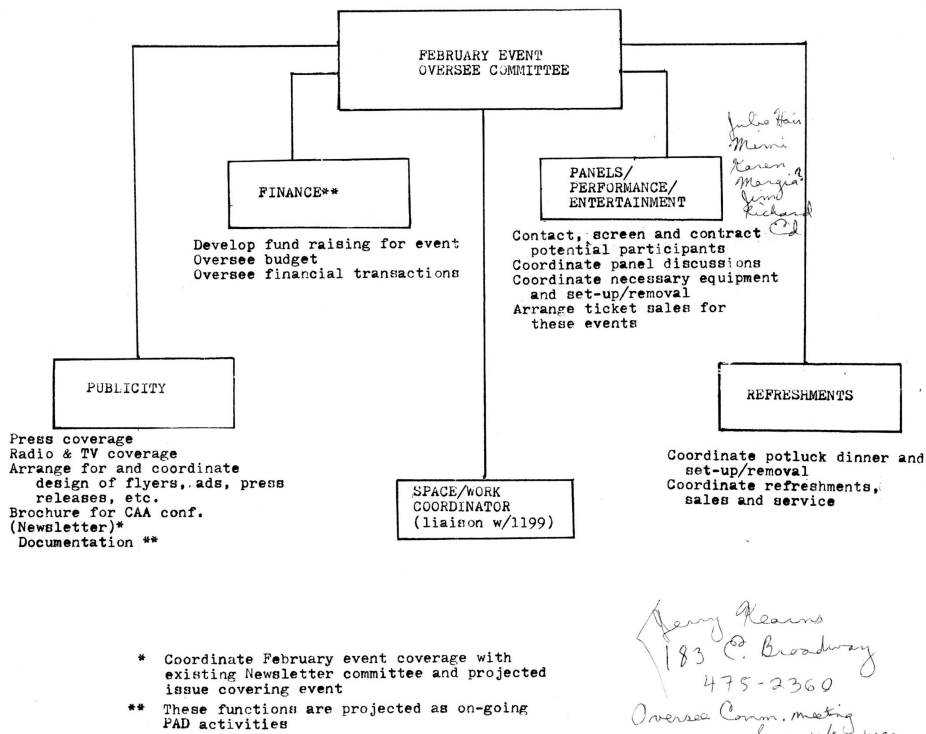


Figure 1.2 "Leninism Lite" A flow-chart diagram map of PAD/D's organizational structure, circa 1983. Permission PAD/D + GSholette Archives

Structure

A snapshot of how the group initially structured itself to achieve its ambitious mission is visible from an internal memo dated October 26th, 1980 entitled; “P.A.D. Work groups.” The typewritten agenda lists twenty-four people and phone numbers (Figure 1.2). Each is assigned to one or more of three working groups that include:

Group I: P.R. [Public Relations], Community Organizations, Cross-country outreach via newsletter and posters.

Group II: The Physical Archives and its organization; the ninth street office and building Archival shows.

Group III: Exhibitions in public places; outreach to political organizations.⁷

Originally headquartered in a former school building on the eastern side of Tompkins Square Park called El Bohio, PAD/D later moved to larger quarters and into the building owned and operated by the A. J. Muste Foundation at the corner of Lafayette and Bleecker Streets. Dubbed the “peace” building because it also housed the pacifist organization The War Resisters League, the group’s other neighbors included Paper Tiger Television and CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. Initially, membership consisted of anyone who happened to be present at any given PAD/D meeting. This soon became untenable when it became apparent that one, highly vocal newcomer could sidetrack an entire project already invested with weeks of work. Membership was soon reformulated to include only those who already showed a commitment to the group by their involvement in specific PAD/D projects or were active in a specific Working Group. The organizational structure continued to develop. Sometime prior to February of 1982, a Steering Committee made up of one person from each work group was established. Flow-charts were drawn-up and debates held about how to vote: for example, does the group pass a resolution based on a majority rule, or does it seek total consensus? (In the end, the group adopted a three-fourths voting rule.)

Before long, a somewhat more centralized and rule bound organization emerged. And in order to allow donors to deduct financial contributions to PAD/D, as well as for the group to attract grant money, the appropriate legal paperwork was filed making PAD/D both a charitable organization and a not for profit, 501 (C) 3 corporation. It was nevertheless a great surprise to group members when PAD/D was in fact selected by a peer review panel at the National Endowment for the Arts for a modest grant to help with the cost of producing *Upfront*. However, Ronald Reagan’s newly appointed NEA Chairman, Francis S.M. Hodsoll quickly made an unprecedented, public denunciation of the review panel’s choice that had also included an award to the *Heresies* journal. The grant was “withdrawn.” This occurrence, together with the defunding of Franklin Furnace artist’s space by the NEA following an exhibition by Carnival Knowledge at about the same time, predated the far more publicized “culture wars” of the early 1990s. (I cannot help speculate that because these events involved art “collectives” rather than individuals, the significance of this censorship appeared less newsworthy and has faded from view.)

PAD/D did indeed function in a strongly collective manner. That does not alter the fact that the contribution of specific individuals uniquely shaped the mission and structure of the group. Certainly, Barbara Moore and Mimi Smith, two members who remained singularly devoted to the PAD/D Archives, hold a special position in this respect. It was the contribution of Lucy R. Lippard however that, more than any other PAD/D member, shaped the overall character of the group.



Figure 1.3 Thought-bubble demonstration placards by Lucy R. Lippard and PAD/D circa 1985. Permission PAD/D + GSholette Archives

Lucy Lippard & PAD/D

Lippard's book chronicling the formation of Conceptual Art, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, functioned as a "new testament" for a "post-Greenbergian" generation of artists who would reject the cool detachment of formalism.⁸ Charismatic and gifted with a ceaseless energy, Lippard was nevertheless a consensus builder. To myself and to many others she also exemplified what cultural theorist Walter Benjamin termed *The Author as Producer*, that is, a bourgeois writer who rejects the "proper" journalistic position of distanced neutrality in favor of active partisanship with a struggle for social change. Needless to say, such overt blurring of roles between critic and activist, observer and participant is anathema to the imagined, aesthetic neutrality of established art history and art criticism and no doubt led to her termination from *The Village Voice* in 1985. But it was Lippard's conspicuous support for art with political content that helped create the foundation for the emergence of PAD/D. As word spread about her interests, initially via another postcard invitation for an exhibition she organized of Rasheed Araeen's work in London, the writer became a magnet for the highly dispersed and largely invisible multitude of artists who sought to combine

their work with political and social activism. Inundated with slides, posters, flyers, manifestos, and related materials Lippard understood that the artists who sent her documentation of their work were not only “invisible” to the art establishment, they were also unseen and isolated from each other as well (Figure 1.3). Logically, the concept of an active archive that could reverse this invisibility emerged out of these observations.

If Lippard’s archival assets served as the growth medium for incubating PAD/D, it was the writer’s presence at *The Village Voice*, a hip, weekly newspaper featuring progressive culture and journalism, which provided the heat, that is until her termination. Her weekly column thrust into view not so much the group itself, but its mission of socially committed art activism. While Lippard provided outward visibility, it was the artist and activist Jerry Kearns who most strongly shaped the internal, administrative, and political dimensions of the group.⁹ Kearns, humorously known within the group as the “commissar,” came to PAD/D soon after it started while he was still active in Amiri Baraka’s Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union as well as the Black United Front. A white, working-class southerner, Kearns had also been part of an Art & Language/*The Fox Magazine* splinter group known as Red Herring. In the pages of the two publications Red Herring produced, the group called on artists to “learn from the masses,” and develop a “proletarian culture” that was specific to North America, yet influenced by Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. This analysis led Red Herring to virtually reject the art world. And while no official political line ever existed within PAD/D, this late, New Left social analysis certainly flavored the discourse of the group, especially during the first two years of 1980 to 1982. At the same time, one can see the formation of internal, disciplinary structures that more closely resemble a political party than it did other, organized artists collectives including most notably Group Material, PAD/Ds closest, artistic “relative” so to speak. Meanwhile, Lippard and Kearns also collaborated on lectures and writings as well as a performance piece entitled “My Place, Your Place, Our Place,” in which they examined the genesis of their own political identities, a strong indication that Lippard’s feminist politics was affecting and changing more orthodox ideological leanings.

Four PAD/D Public Actions

Largely unknown are the numerous collective art projects PAD/D produced during its six-year tenure. Typically edged in a critical yet ironic humor, these primarily public works avoid what Fredric Jameson calls the “flattened affect” of post-modernist pastiche. What follows are descriptions of four of PAD/D’s most salient projects including *Death and Taxes*, *Image War on the Pentagon*, *No More Witch-Hunts*, and *Not For Sale: A Project Against Displacement*. Notably, each one privileged public performance and ephemeral work over art objects.

Death and Taxes (April, 1981)

Death and Taxes (D&T) began as an open invitation for artists anywhere in NYC to produce public works protesting the use of federal taxes for military instead of social programs. Artists were asked to document what they did and send this to Gallery 345, a small not for profit space run by Karen DiGia and located just downstairs from the PAD/D office on Lafayette Street. Approximately twenty artists responded to the call, placing their work in subways, armories, public toilets, and banks. One example of works produced for *Death and Taxes* include 1,000 IRS 1040A tax forms gathered up, “altered” and then put back into circulation at banks and Post Offices in downtown Manhattan by Micki McGee. McGee printed over top of the government document her own public service agit-prop art that read in part: “53¢

of every tax dollar goes to military and defense budgets... over half your tax dollar....” The boxes normally used for reporting income were filled-in already with graphic images of a fighter jet dropping bombs and a soldier marching. On a second page another line of type informs the citizen, “How would your life be different if your taxes went to...,” followed by a series of choices that include “public transportation instead of aircraft carriers” and “the arts and humanities instead of war debts.” The latter text was punctuated by a wheelchair bound figure.

Other *Death & Taxes* projects included: anti-military propaganda printed directly onto dollar bills that were then re-circulated; Lynn Hugh’s graphic stickers attached to public pay-phones alerting the caller that the 2% federal tax on telephone calls goes to the military; and Alain Resnais’ film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, projected onto the 26th street armory by Tim Rollins from his apartment located across the street. Rollins describes reactions to the public projection as ranging from sidewalk cheers to rotten fruit thrown at his apartment window.¹⁰ In addition, PAD/D member Michael Anderson was arrested after tossing a fabricated, human “dummy” onto the bayonet of a World War I memorial at another armory location. Anderson spent a night in prison, later appearing in Brooklyn Criminal Court where the charges were dismissed.

These public interventions were joined by a fifty-foot high T-Rex skeleton made of pink-vinyl sewn to camouflage netting labeled: “Can’t Afford to Live? Too Alive to Die?” a work conceived by PAD/D artists team Anne Pitrone and Thomas Masaryk. These “Skeletal Estates” were located in an abandoned city lot on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where passersby were invited to invest in, “the very best in underground living” that offered “fool-proof protection from ‘intelligent’ missiles as well as Con Ed [Con Edison is the City’s power company] and NY telephone [no longer extant].” Pitrone later co-founded the art collective, Carnival Knowledge with graphic novelist Sabrina Jones, a feminist group that employed circus posters and other forms of vernacular art to promote women’s sexuality as well as to protest attacks on reproductive rights from Catholics and evangelical conservatives. All of these D&T interventions took place at about the same time and in different parts of NYC, transforming the documentation on display at Gallery 345 into an informational nerve center for the overall project.

Image War on the Pentagon (May, 1981)

Image War on the Pentagon consisted of dozens of cardboard picket signs carried along by PAD/D members during a demonstration in Washington D.C. on May 3rd of 1981. On one side of these portable signs wordless, black and white cartoons revealed images of bombs, generals, and rifles each crossed out with a dramatic red ‘X’. On the flip side of these placards were colorful images of investments public money could be used for, including: a loaf of bread, a glass of milk, a hammer, and a pair of human hands, one white and one black, clasped together. Fabricated in the studio of PAD/D member Mike Glier, *Image War* was designed for use in the massive march on the pentagon organized by the People’s Antiwar Mobilization that drew over 100,000 people to protest budget cuts and US involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua. My own contribution was a Pentagon-shaped vacuum-formed plastic protest sign that looked like it was made from a hang-men’s noose – it was stenciled with the words “Give em’ Enough Rope” taken from an early album by The Clash. Given the even greater variance between most people today and the 1%, it is not surprising that PAD/D’s *Image War on the Pentagon* is the group’s most frequently cited work, not including the archive at MoMA.

No More Witch Hunts (June 13, 1981)

In 1981 the Reagan administration passed new and sweeping anti-terrorist laws giving the government expanded powers of surveillance over US citizens. Many understood these so-called anti-terrorist laws as a thinly disguised legal justification for spying on domestic

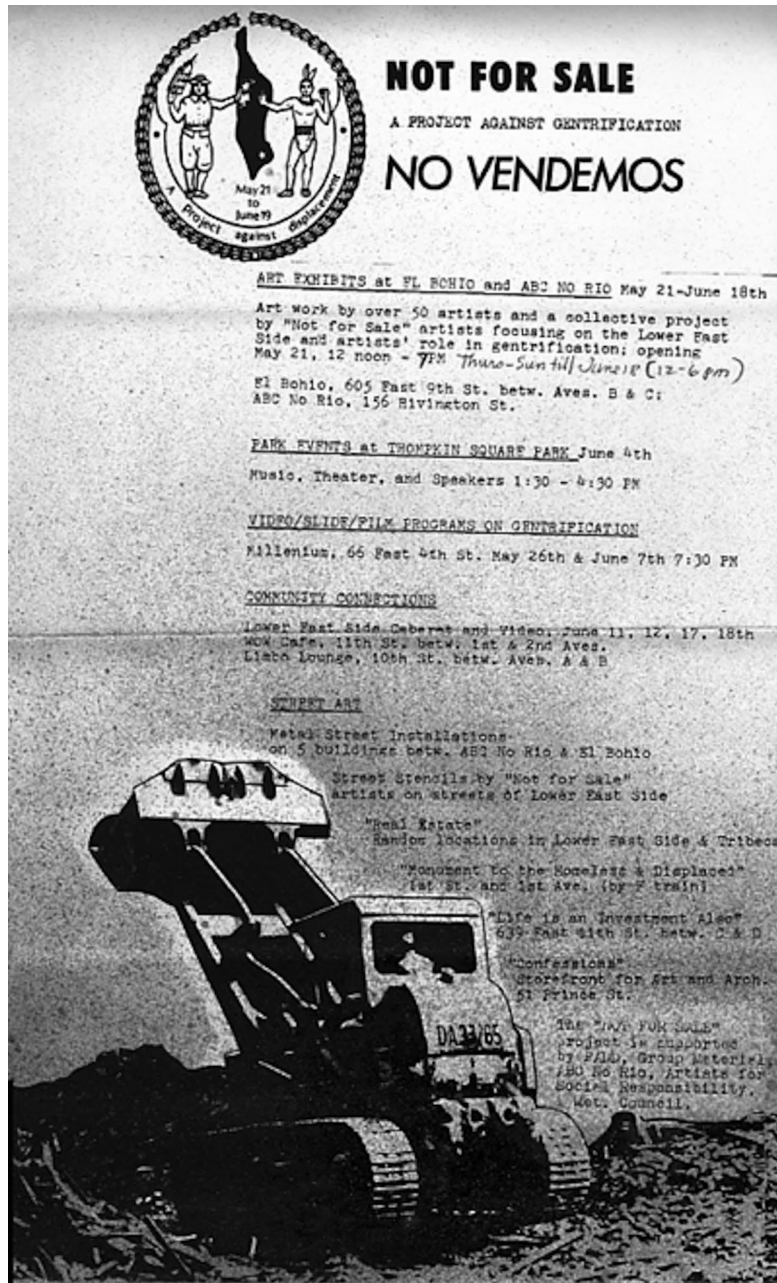


Figure 1.4 PAD/D poster by Not for Sale committee's anti-gentrification project, NYC, 1983. Permission PAD/D + GSholette Archives

supporters of the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation), a Salvadorian-based insurrectionary organization opposed to the US-backed regime of José Napoleon Duarte. *No More Witch Hunts* brought together religious activists, a local progressive union, legal activists, and artists. Group Material members performed a mocking, military-influenced disco dance outfitted in hybrid “uniforms” that grafted together standard General Issue camouflage with the bright red colors of the FMLN. Such reflexive and playful use of visual signifiers marked the increasing experimentation and confidence of a new “political art” that was consciously distancing itself from the banners and murals of the past. Group Material (GM) would go on to collaborate with FMLN on other projects and events, developing a working relationship with Salvadorian activist Daniel Flores and Catalina Para among others. One outcome of both PAD/D and GM’s involvement with Central American activists and artists was the omnibus 1984 project *Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America*, that took place in hundreds of venues around NYC and the country with a poster designed by Claus Oldenburg.¹¹

Not For Sale: A Project Against Displacement (1983 & 1984)

One of the more ambitious projects the group sponsored grew out of a reading group started in 1981 by member’s Jim Murray, Michael Anderson, and myself. For a year, the PAD/D Reading Group had been meeting and discussing essays by Bertolt Brecht, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, George Lukacs as well as C.L.R. James and Antonio Negri. Eventually, the group arrived at a point of frustration with theory apart from practice. The outcome was two projects that sought to address the encroaching gentrification of the Lower East Side, which was also the neighborhood where many of us resided. The transformation from a reading group into an activist group was completed with the choosing of a new identity: the PAD/D, Not For Sale Committee, as in “The Lower East Side is *Not For Sale*.”

The first *Not For Sale* (NFS) project was housed in El Bohio, the same community center that “PAD” was initially headquartered in four years earlier (Figure 1.4). With a small stipend from the parent group, the NFS Committee constructed temporary walls and installed a massive exhibition of 200 art works. Punk bands, guerrilla theater and activist rabble-rousers accompanied the opening while throughout the night, teams of stencil artists took to the streets armed with spray paint and anti-gentrification imagery. Additional video and cabaret presentations took place at the Millennium Film Theater and neighborhood “art bars” including the Wow Cafe and Limbo Lounge. New to the idea of curating and politically opposed to imposing a selection process on participating artists, virtually anyone with an interest in the exhibition was included. The result was that most of the entries were disappointingly unrelated to the issue of economic and cultural displacement, and some of the venues located outside of El Bohio where the primary exhibition was located also belonged to the same East Village Art Scene that many of us understood to be part of the process of gentrification itself. Worse still, when *New York Times* arts reviewer Grace Glueck included news of our event in a piece she entitled “Pioneering in New Territories,” we were dismayed.¹² As one NFS member Janet Koenig cogently put it, the Lower East Side was becoming Off-Off West Broadway (at that time West Broadway was still the center of the City’s mainstream art scene).

In the months that followed the NFS Committee reflected on the contradictions the exhibition had generated. We re-thought our strategy and decided to produce a more tactical and flexible project for the coming year. The new project, entitled: *Art for the Evicted: A Project Against Displacement*, began as a call for artists to produce twenty copies of an

anti-gentrification poster that the NFS Committee pledged to paste and re-paste in neighborhood streets during the coming months. The group then overlaid still another layer of critique by selecting four outdoor locations in which to focus the poster campaign while at the same time christening these “street galleries” with fictional appellations directly mocking the East Village Art Scene itself. The four, ersatz galleries included: The Discount Salon, Another Gallery, The Leona Helmsley Gallery (the latter located on a derelict building overlooking Tompkins Square Park that the Helmsley’s speculation juggernaut later turned into million-dollar condos), and The Guggenheim Downtown. Prophetically named, The Guggenheim Downtown was situated on Avenue A and 10th Street years before Thomas Krens opened a branch of the Guggenheim Museum below 14th Street.

The Guggenheim Downtown was in fact where our “opening” took place on April 28th, 1984. Local community activists were invited to set up tables with voter registration information. The group also produced its own exhibition poster that was screen-printed at the Lower East Side Print Shop. It depicted a beat-up suitcase stamped with four travel stickers, one for each fictive NFS street gallery. The Guggenheim Downtown sported a logo of a thick machine screw turned on its head, Another Gallery was rendered in graffiti style and the Leona Helmsley Gallery was elegant, befitting the “queen of mean” who had not yet served time for tax evasion. As promised, the NFS posters went up in the street every week often to soon disappear beneath layers of other street broadsides. Sometime in late May of 1984 we prematurely ran out of replacements and the exhibition came to an end. The only media coverage of the project was in *Art in America*, that same year critic Craig Owens championed NFS as a counter-weight to the East Village Scene. Owens described PAD/D’s project as serving to “mobilize resistance against the political and economic interests which East Village art serves.”¹³

PAD/D’s Legacy

PAD/D remained in existence for almost eight years in total. By the mid- to late 1980s, with more and more time taken-up by the business of running the organization, many members began to feel the group’s artistic mission, and perhaps also its political mission, were becoming eclipsed by too many institutional demands. At this same time, a prudent form of “Political Art” – works that merely represented as opposed to actively seeking to intervene within situations of social and political injustice – had begun to find its way into the museums and art galleries in New York. With fewer and fewer new members joining the group, and many unwilling to commit to the multitude of tasks and meetings it required, the once robust organization began to languish. The group produced its last newsletter in 1987 and technically its 501 (C) 3 status remained in effect as late as 1988. PAD/D’s auspicious mission – for reasons both internal and external – had ceased to be viable.

Nevertheless, the PAD/D Archive Committee intrepidly continued working on the extensive repository of political art. Consisting primarily of Barbara Moore and Mimi Smith, they cataloged and cross-referenced hundreds of entries by hand on standard index cards. In 1989, the PAD/D Archive, originally conceived as a form of counter-cultural activism in which models of politically engaged art-making would be circulated like a tactical toolbox, finally found its lasting institutional home in the Museum of Modern Art Library. This was one of Clive Philpot’s last acts before resigning from MoMA, and the irony was not lost on former PAD/D members. In 1988 Deborah Wye, the Museum’s Curator of Prints organized an impressive survey of “political art” entitled *Committed To Print* in which the PAD/D Archives played a key research role. Nevertheless, the vast majority of work documented in the

PAD/D Archives remains invisible today and forms the cultural equivalent of cosmic dark matter: that unknown, unseen material that according to the Standard Theory of cosmology constitutes the majority of the visible universe.

Certainly, as a means of repelling gentrification, or even more ambitiously, establishing an alternative realm of artistic practice, PAD/D did not succeed. It did however provide a foundation and office space for another art collective known as REPOhistory, which was co-founded in 1989 by several of the former group's members including Lippard and myself. The organization also gifted the PAD/D Archive to the activist art community, as well as those critics and historians interested in exploring this history. With almost 2,000 entries spanning the years 1979–1988 and including performance art, guerrilla actions, street posters, gallery-based political art, as well as plans for an international art strike in 1969, the PAD/D Archive has since served as a significant resource for a new generation of art activists, but also scholars, critics, and art historians. It is clear that the very presence of such an archive has impacted not only the content, but also the methodology of cultural research in recent years by introducing into the study of art the possibility that what is not represented or legitimated by mainstream institutions may have a significant influence on the very nature and direction of contemporary art itself.¹⁴

Afterthoughts on the PAD/D Archive and Its Cheshire Grin

“We didn’t make judgments about the art,” insists Archive Committee member Moore in an interview with the contemporary artists’ collective Temporary Services in 2007, although as it turns out one set of submitted artworks was rejected for inclusion as I will return to below.¹⁵ As if to underscore the sheer physicality of the collection’s 51.2 linear feet of materials Moore adds “an archive is not a qualitative thing.”¹⁶ Her comments point to a curious fact: although Moore and Smith occasionally collected material themselves, even cutting posters off city walls, the PAD/D Archive was nevertheless almost entirely self-selected by those who supplied its content. The Archive Committee’s task as they saw it was to follow the mission of the group by “building a collection of documentation of international socially-concerned art.” The first PAD/D newsletter in 1981 listed the only real criteria for this collection as “social concern,” defined in the broadest sense, “as any work that deals with issues ranging from sexism and racism to ecological damage or other forms of human oppression.”¹⁷ In the same newsletter readers were encouraged to send materials – slides, posters, artists’ books, photos, published multiples – in 9 ½ inch by 12 inch manila envelopes to the PAD/D office on the Lower East Side. Whatever was delivered eventually received a label, a categorization, and storage. The overarching ideal of social concern is made flesh, flaws included. As the late and storied French filmmaker Chris Marker once commented,

The mode of information forms part of the information....bringing the document closer to the specific circumstances of its preparation, makes it so that the information does not appear as a mental thing, but as matter – with its grain, its asperities, sometimes its splinters.¹⁸

Which is to say, the documents within the archive effectively establish it as an economy of interpretation, and in truth, the very archivalization of post-’68 radical art by the Museum of Modern Art, or any major cultural institution for that matter, could have only been made possible once any actual threat to institutional authority had fully passed.

A significant question asserts itself: what role does the rebel archive play within an institution such as the MoMA, especially considering PAD/D's repository of social and political art was premised on a definite radical animosity toward institutional authority itself? If, on the one hand, the museum's own loving internment of this material testifies to the generosity of the institution, it also reveals, on the other, its unbridled capacity to exert power all the way down, into the finest of details and historical shadows, including its grain, its asperities, and splinters. At the same time, the very presence of such an archive, with its prodigious index of forgotten projects, groups, actions, and so forth, attests to the fact that opposition to established cultural hierarchies is not in the least uncommon. We might read this archival supplement therefore, as an internal deviation or lesion on the body of the proper historical canon.

As critic Simon Sheikh perceptively observes, institutional memory requires the omission of certain subjects, not because of willful acts of exodus or rebellion, but because "expulsions at the very center of institutions... allow them to institutionalize?"¹⁹ Which is to say the supplemental, even redundant archive of radical art that the PAD/D Archive shows us a glimpse into, does not belong to some fantastic world apart, but is instead fully inscribed within the institution's ideological architecture. It is a necessary, if mute, presence that is filled with its own micro-histories, resistant practices, and partially submerged "outlaw" memories. Returning to Marker, the filmmaker reflects on the weeks leading-up to the revolutionary events of Paris in May 1968, describing an impromptu meeting with famed Marxist theorist Louis Althusser as follows:

I listened to him as in zero-gravity. Facing me was not a likeable young leftist nut, but one of the greatest French intellectuals of his time. For him, as for others, Revolution was in the air, and had to be, like the grin of the Cheshire Cat. He would always see that grin. And he wouldn't (nor would anyone) ever see the Cat.

Of all the documents, flyers, posters, and other archival materials delivered to the PAD/D offices between 1980 and 1988, the only submission rejected by the Archive Committee were several woodcut block-prints of house cats. Still, perhaps sometimes, a grin is all one has to work with, especially in anticipation of the revolution that is forever yet to come.²⁰

Notes

- 1 Announcement for "Some British Art from the Left" (June 16–July 14, 1979), Artists Space NYC, see Artists Space website archive: <https://artistspace.org/exhibitions/art-from-the-british-left#announcement>
- 2 PAD/D Mission Statement from the group's first newsletter *1st Issue*, February 1981, journal is later renamed *Upfront*.
- 3 Tiernan Morgan, "Art in the 1980s: The Forgotten History of PAD/D," *Hyperallergic*, April 17, 2014: <https://hyperallergic.com/117621/art-in-the-1980s-the-forgotten-history-of-padd/>
- 4 See, for example, Nandini Bagchee's important volume, *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side*. Fordham University Press, 2018; and Jennie Waldow, "An Archive of Activism: Political Art Documentation and Distribution," *The Ephemera Journal*, 23, no. 1 (September 2021), Tiernan Morgan's essay "Art in the 1980s: The Forgotten History of PAD/D," in the online journal *Hyperallergic*, 2014: <https://hyperallergic.com/117621/art-in-the-1980s-the-forgotten-history-of-padd/>; as well as material in the forthcoming book from MIT Press by Claire Grace, *Art Demonstration: Group Material and the 1980s*.
- 5 PAD/D Mission Statement, *1st Issue*, February 1981.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Original memo is in the Lippard Papers at Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute's NYC branch.

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- 8 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, 1997, originally published in 1972.
- 9 Besides Kearns, Lippard, and myself, other artists active with the group at one time or another include Herb Perr, Holly Zox, Keith Christensen, Tim Rollins, Doug Ashford, Martha Rosler, Michael Anderson, Ed Eisenberg, Janet Koenig, Karen Knowles, Glenn Stevens, Jody Wright, some however, were more active with committee work than were others.
- 10 Rollins is cited in the group's second offset newsletter: 1st Issue PAD/D, May–June 1981. #2, p. 3.
- 11 For more about the ongoing work GM carried out with Central American activists, including Artists Call see the website of former group member Doug Ashford: <http://www.dougashford.info/> and the book edited by Julie Ault, *Show And Tell: A Chronicle Of Group Material*, Four Corners Press, 2010.
- 12 Grace Glueck, "A Gallery Scene That Pioneers in New Territories," *The New York Times*: Section 2, Page 27 June 26, 1983: <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/26/arts/gallery-view-a-gallery-scene-that-pioneers-in-new-territories.html>
- 13 Craig Owens, "Commentary: The Problem with Puerilism," in *Art in America*, Summer 1984, later even this minor reference was deleted from a posthumous book of the critic's collected essays, an erasure I reflect upon in the opening pages of *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, op cit.)
- 14 For more on this concept, see Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 2010.
- 15 According to Barbara Moore and Mimi Smith, the only items they received but did not incorporate into the collection were several woodcut prints of cats. See interview with Moore in the book, *Group Work by Temporary Services* New York: Printed Matter Inc., 2007, p. 86.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 1st Issue, a four page offset newsletter published by PAD/[D], NYC, February, 1981.
- 18 Chris Marker *Points of Reference*, notes to "The Grin Without a Cat," booklet published with *A Grin Without A Cat*, DVD, ICARUS Films, 2008, p. 7.
- 19 Simon Sheikh, "Notes on Institutional Critique," in Raunig and Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice*, p. 31.
- 20 Some parts of the final section of this chapter first appeared in G. Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press, 2010, and an earlier version of the essay appears on the website of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain.

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- . "Interference Archive." 2021. <https://interferencearchive.org/tag/padd/>