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The Politics of Interventionist Art: The Situationist International, Artist Placement Group, and Art Workers' Coalition

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

This essay offers an analysis of three art projects from the 1960s—the Situationist International, Artist Placement Group, and Art Workers' Coalition—that all tried to mobilize avant-garde art as a political tool to address social issues and bring about social transformation. The Situationists tried to leave behind the art world and turned toward ultraleft politics. Artist Placement Group sought to use the creativity of art in contexts outside the traditional barriers of the institution of art. Art Workers' Coalition put pressure on the art establishment in New York, trying to force it into implementing a more open and less exclusive exhibition policy as well as taking a moral stance on the Vietnam War. The three projects present us with different models of how art can be engaged in politics.

Key Words: Situationist International, Artist Placement Group, Art Workers' Coalition, Spectacle, Sixties

During the past decade we have seen various attempts to use art as a platform for the discussion of social and political problems. As national populist movements have left their mark on several European nations, and since the so-called war on terror was initiated, we have witnessed different artistic attempts to address the current historical development characterized by the launch of a global offensive by Western capital against an “Islamic terror threat.”¹

1. Since September 11, the modulation logic of the society of control has fused with the capitalist state's logic of security; together they constitute a new regime of war that has as its mission the direction of the movements of globalization (see Zarifian 2003). The attempt to derail the multicultural potentials of globalization and confirm the supremacy of the American bourgeoisie, and in particular its control over the world's oil supply and capital movements, has nonetheless shown temporary fractions within the international bourgeois community, resulting in a loss of legitimacy for the United States and the war on terror. The open attempt to set aside international conventions, the torture in Abu Ghraib, and the escalating militarization of the public sphere have resulted in a moral breakdown. For an analysis of the undermining of the constitutional state, see Paye (2004). For an analysis of Abu Ghraib and the war on terror, see Hersh (2004). For an analysis of the militarization of the public sphere in the United States, see Giroux (2004).

In this situation, where we find ourselves in the middle of an accelerated attempt to control the movements of globalization, it might be useful to look back on former attempts by artists to use art as an instrument to address social problems and as a tool with which to intervene within public debate. By turning our attention to a time traditionally characterized as the glorious days of engaged art, we will see how it is possible to combine artistic experiment with political comment. What follows is a presentation and discussion of three different artistic projects: the Situationist International, Artist Placement Group, and Art Workers' Coalition. Each of these projects tried in its own way to intervene in political discussions and to criticize institutional and social conditions. Together with many other groups in the 1960s, these tried to move away from the institutional structures of art toward a broader cultural and political practice. Through the use of new and relatively accessible means of expression such as video, photography, and postcards, these and other artists sought to challenge the prevailing modernist art institution (that valued unique works of art) as well as to criticize the Fordist model of production by staging semiautonomous environments consisting of independent objects and flows of desire beyond the control of the creator to enable the participation of the spectator (Sell 1998). The three artistic projects were characterized as being part of a wider movement away from "object production" and toward cultural intervention not necessarily (intended as) art.

The small, exclusive, postsurrealist group, the Situationist International, which tried to cut its ties to the art world and move toward ultraleft politics, occupied the most radical position in trying to set free the creative forces of art in everyday life: namely, aesthetic emancipation in a universal commodity-society. According to the Situationists, art, by mythologizing the individual, had become an integral part of consumer society; therefore, it had to be superseded by revolutionary insurrection. The Situationists chose the maximalist position: All or nothing; only the revolution is a solution. Small aesthetic gains were of no relevance to the Situationists who sought to enable the proletariat to seize power and the means of production in order to bring about the aesthetic transformation of society through total economic and political democracy.

In contrast, the Artist Placement Group and the Art Workers' Coalition never demonstrated the same kind of radicalism, and they more or less stayed within the limits of the art world, still conceiving of themselves as artists no matter how politicized they or their rhetoric became. This is the main difference between the three groups. The Situationists wanted to bring about the destruction of the separation of all the spheres of class society, including the supersession of art as a separate sphere of society, while the other two groups ultimately remained within the sphere of art, unable to connect themselves with the proletariat.

In 1969, a relatively large group of artists, critics, and others connected to the art world founded a loosely structured organization, Art Workers' Coalition. This organization acted as the catalyst for a number of artists and critics who wanted to react to the explosive political events that marked the late 1960s, such as the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement's critique of the imperialist, racist, and sexist politics of the U.S. government. These artists and critics sought to approach political issues without, however, abandoning what we, with Herbert Marcuse, might

term the relative autonomy of art.² Very few of these artists stopped making art, and there was no attempt to make a direct connection between the political commitment of the artists as citizens and the art they made. The individual artwork did not have to contain a political message, and the identity of the artist as artist was never really in question.³

From 1965, the British group, Artist Placement Group, examined the social potential of art by placing artists in public institutions and companies. The placements were intended to introduce a different time perspective from that companies and institutions normally followed, making the creativity of art available outside the confines of the art institution and thereby pointing toward another way of life.

All three groups are examples of how difficult it was for artists in the 1960s to move from a mere representation of political events to direct intervention in political debates and conflicts, and further, to direct engagement with the forces of cultural production and their political organization.

It is relevant to analyze these projects from the 1960s because much contemporary art is directly or indirectly inspired by their actions, and because many contemporary artists are reusing strategies and forms initially developed by these and related groups. When contemporary artists create discussion platforms, serve food, or carry out different kinds of jobs or services, we are confronted with projects that are often very similar to the conceptual or performance artworks of the 1960s.⁴ There is a lot of current interest in art from the 1960s with many contemporary artists explicitly

2. As Herbert Marcuse (1968) argues, art has been equipped with relative independence in modern bourgeois society: an independence that makes it possible for the individual artwork to express “irrational” needs and preserve a representation of freedom in a society otherwise characterized by means-ends rationality. Art is thus a “free” zone from which a radical and alternative potential can be formulated, but the art work has limited social effects because of the framing of the institution of art.

3. This is the main difference between the three groups. Although all of them were in different regards skeptical toward the art institution and its mediation of the content of the individual work of art, only the Situationist International dissociated itself “from those artistic milieus which, despite being foreign to every form of institutionalization, persevere in practising activities that can at any time be recuperated by the cultural establishment” (Perniola 1999, 91). The Situationists tried to distance themselves from the art world because art, according to them, was an alienated activity. As a privileged and autonomous form, art is separated from life; this is the basic structure of art, the irretrievably bourgeois structure of art, the Situationists argued. Artistic creation is the visible expression of an alienated activity. As Debord phrased it, “Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In this search for unity, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself” (1994, 180) The artist expresses his or her real needs artistically instead of realizing them practically. This artistic expression is the only kind of creativity that bourgeois society permits. The efficiency of wage labor corresponds to artistic activity’s freedom without effect: thus, capitalism and art are two sides of the same coin, according to the Situationist International. Therefore, art had to be suppressed and realized in revolutionary practice.

4. The British artist Liam Gillick creates so-called discussion platforms of brightly colored translucent screens mimicking corporate architecture. The Thai-American artist Rirkrit Tiravanija has on several occasions prepared Thai meals for gallery visitors. The American artist Christine Hill has opened the so-called Wolksboutique where visitors can buy cheap clothes.

appropriating the formal look of works from that time, but these appropriations are often not able to control the original forms and strategies and therefore risk diminishing the criticality of the original activities, reducing them to mere museum pieces disconnected from real political struggles.

Such a trend may hark back to the problematic way the neo-avant-garde itself in the 1960s strove to control the montage techniques and ready-made strategies of the historical avant-garde of the interwar years.⁵ Like contemporary art, which from my perspective has an unclear relationship to the art of the 1960s, the art of the 1960s had an unresolved relationship to the historical avant-garde of the interwar years. In fact, the difficult position of contemporary art trying to critique an ever more powerful art institution and collaborating with different political movements is not so different from that the Situationist International, Fluxus, and conceptual art had in their day. These forms of art practice themselves experienced difficulties opposing or distancing themselves critically from the “image-regimes” that dominated Western society after World War Two.⁶ As will be clear from my presentation, the Situationists, Artist Placement Group, and Art Workers’ Coalition experienced great difficulties in distinguishing between the forms they created and the representations derived from the prevailing image-regime. It was extremely difficult to tell the difference between subversion and recuperation, between critique and cooption, and the art of the 1960s dangerously mimed the forms of the society of the spectacle, trying desperately to turn these forms upside down.

From Work of Art to Revolution: The Situationist International

One of the groups that continues today to receive some attention from the art world is the small Situationist group, which existed from 1957 to 1972, when the group finally dissolved itself. This interest is paradoxical as the Situationist International stopped making art soon after its formation, working instead as a group of theoreticians and experimenters dedicated to formulating an ultracritical theory on

5. For an analysis of contemporary art’s use of forms and strategies from the 1960s, see Foster (1996). It is clear that a discussion of the way contemporary art uses (consciously or not) forms from the 1960s has to be seen in connection with the way the art of the 1960s discovered and reused strategies from the interwar avant-garde. Besides Foster’s analysis, it is of course Peter Bürger’s classic account in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) that has to act as the point of departure for a discussion of the relations between the interwar avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, and the contemporary post-neo-avant-garde. According to Bürger, the historical avant-garde tried to eliminate the distance between art and everyday life while the neo-avant-garde did no more than repeat the critical gestures of the historical avant-garde inside the institution of art. Bürger briefly argues that in the passage from dada and surrealism to the avant-gardes of the postwar period, the avant-garde was swallowed up by the culture industry.

6. As the historian Perry Anderson (following Fredric Jameson’s characterization of postmodernity) phrases it, post-World War Two culture was saturated by “perpetual emotion machines [television being the prime example], transmitting discourses that are wall-to-wall ideology, in the strong sense of the term” (Anderson 1998, 89).

the historical development and degeneration of art. The Situationists' project was characterized by its refusal of both the art world and all reformist political organizations. The Situationists attacked the naïve belief in art as well as politics as the illusionary means of emancipation from the society of the spectacle. The task was to supersede art as a separate sphere of society as well as apart from politics, state, and legislation. As T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith stress: the last thing the Situationists wanted was to end their days in a museum of art (Clark and Nicholson-Smith 1997).

It is customary to divide the existence of the Situationist organization into three phases. From 1957 to 1961, different artistic media like painting and architecture were used as instruments by the Situationists in their critique of the society of the spectacle and its art. After 1961, use of traditional artistic media decreased and was replaced by the development of a theory about postwar capitalist society.⁷ In this period, the Situationists focused on analyzing the spectacle. They argued that the dominance of capital was being perfected through the general commodification of fetishes in the production and consumption of material and symbolic goods, all of which were representations or images. The society of the spectacle disseminated appearances through a symbolic production apparatus of gigantic proportions. In this process, where society was no longer justified by reference to anything beyond it, capitalism was engaged in a sweeping attempt to empty society of all "association" and "community," with the object of consolidating the overproduction and consumption of commodities. This development was followed by a parallel attempt in which the state, as the loyal associate of capital, rapidly involved itself in the day-to-day instrumental production of consumer obedience. Capitalism tried to prevent the realization of new revolutionary possibilities by creating a mirror image in which the division of society was concealed by false representations. The result of this process was the society of the spectacle, the spectacular market society, where people passively contemplated a world impervious to their intervention.

In the late 1960s, some of the Situationists participated actively in the occupation of the Sorbonne and were, among other things, responsible for a large part of the communiqués that were sent out during the occupation. After May '68, the Situationist group began to fall apart because of internal disagreements, and because the group was unable to cope with the attention it received after its involvement in the unrest. In 1972, the group was officially dissolved by two of the three remaining members.

It was during their first phase, when artists like Asger Jorn and Constant were active among the Situationists, that the group developed a series of techniques with which they sought to dominate the artistic media and use art as a propaganda tool. Even in this first phase, the Situationists did not regard their praxis as artistic, mixing ultraleft currents like council communism and Western Marxism with interest in surrealism and dada.⁸ "We take our stand on the other side of culture. Not before it,

7. For presentations of the Situationist International, see Ford (2005), Macdonald (1995), Martos (1989), and Perniola (1998).

8. For an analysis of the way the Situationists tried to position themselves in opposition to surrealism, the French Communist party, and other left-wing currents, see Rasmussen (2004a).

but *after it*. We feel it is necessary to realise culture by transcending it as a separate sphere” (Internationale situationniste 1963, 21). Following the almost invisible project of the Lettrist International, which took place far away from the institution of art and the political scene throughout the 1950s, the Situationist project was initiated as an attempt to create a revolutionary avant-garde that could coordinate the struggle against capital.⁹ The Situationists wanted to create a counter public sphere where they could unite dispersed attempts to challenge the existing state of things. The struggle against capital was to take place as an *Aufhebung* of art and politics; these separate spheres were to be superseded by a total revolutionary activity. Art thus formed a part of the Situationist project, but only as a component; art was not a goal in itself. The creation of works of art to be displayed in galleries and museums was counter to the interests of the Situationists. Revolutionary art took place beyond the institution of art and beyond the separation of artist and spectator, thereby overcoming the cultural division of labor according to which some people are creative while most people are mere spectators. Instead of showing people how to live, the point was to make people live.¹⁰

One of the Situationists’ main techniques for destroying the spectacle and for disrupting the false coherence of the capitalist system was the so-called *détournement*, where an already existing expression was changed. In this operation, the process of signification is exposed and the original intention is denaturalized. According to the Situationists, the *détournement* was supposed not only to scandalize art, but also to make propaganda for the Situationist cause. The *détournement* technique was used in a range of different contexts over the years: Jorn used it in his artistic modifications where he painted on old, second-rate canvases; Guy Debord used the technique in his films where he appropriated sequences from commercials, newsreels, and Westerns; and Michèle Bernstein used it in her novels *Tous les chevaux du roi* and *La Nuit*, where she mocked the style of *le nouveau roman*. The Danish Situationist, J. V. Martin, used the technique on several occasions where he changed images from the daily newspapers and exposed what, according to the Situationists, was the false coherence of the spectacle. In 1964, Martin produced a thousand postcards with an image of the British call girl Christine Keeler. He had drawn a balloon from Keeler’s mouth: “As the Situationist International says: It is more honourable to be a prostitute like me than to marry a fascist like Konstantin.”¹¹ The

9. The Lettrist International was founded in Paris in 1952 by a splinter group from the Lettrist group that the Romanian artist Isidore Isou had founded in the aftermath of World War Two to rejuvenate art and society. The split occurred because Isou, according to the seceding members, had been coopted by the cultural establishment. Gathering around Guy Debord, the members of the Lettrist International pledged to continue the fight for social regeneration in a way that would prevent their assimilation into mainstream culture.

10. As philosophers like Jean-Luc Nancy and Mario Perniola have pointed out, the distinction between spectacle and life in Situationist theory appears rather abstract; life is never specified but is simply the formal negation of the spectacle. There is “no other way [for the Situationists] of designating what is proper—that is, non-appearance—except as the obscure opposite of the spectacle” (Nancy 2000, 51).

11. For a presentation of Martin’s postcards and his role within the Situationist movement, see Rasmussen (2004b).

year before, Keeler had caught the public eye when it came out that she was sleeping with both a Soviet navy officer, Eugene Ivanov, and the British Secretary of State for War, John Profumo. Profumo lied about the affair and was subsequently forced to resign. During the scandal, the photographer Lewis Morley took a series of photos of Keeler to be used in connection with the promotion of a motion picture that was never realized. In one of the photos, a naked Keeler is sitting astride a copy of the Danish designer Arne Jacobsen's famous ant-chair. This photo was quickly reproduced in magazines and circulated all over the world. It was this photo Martin chose for the postcard with which he attempted to scandalize the royal Danish family. The juxtaposition of a naked Keeler and the text bubble, in which the recently celebrated marriage between Danish Princess Anne-Marie and the Greek King Konstantin II was invoked, left little doubt as to the Situationist attitude toward the political situation in Greece. The British government and the Greek and Danish monarchies were, according to Martin, all part of a crypto-fascist world whose days were numbered. Beneath the makeup, Keeler was a corpse. The bad reproduction of the postcard just underlined this aspect: It was a matter of time; along with the rest of this world, she was doomed. The Danish monarchy and the British government were going down. All these sparkling representations were going to be torn aside by the destructive movement of the revolution.

In the years after 1961, the *détournement* technique was very rarely used in connection with the traditional media of art. Instead, it was in the streets that the Situationists tried to put the technique to use. These activities culminated in May '68 in Paris where several Situationists took part in the occupation of the Sorbonne. Barricades were built and the police were met with Molotov cocktails and bricks. Cars were set on fire, shops were robbed, and the walls of the city were covered with slogans and graffiti. For the Situationists, this was the right use of the *détournement* technique. A different use of the city suddenly became visible, challenging capitalism's organization of the environment. The fight against the spectacle had to take place here and now. The spectacular market economy and its shining depotentiated representations had to be smashed.¹²

One of the aspects that distinguished the Situationists from later interventionist art was the belief that capitalism was doomed. In accordance with their reliance on a council communist reading of *Capital*, they were sure that capitalism could not overcome its contradictions; they were sure that the death of the spectacular commodity economy was at hand, and they worked hard to make this happen. *Les Trente Glorieuses* and the golden days of capitalism were just a desperate attempt to postpone the day of reckoning, they argued. The task was therefore to analyze this boom as a temporary phenomena, as a superficial solution to the real problems of capital, and the task of the avant-garde was to accelerate the impending collapse of the spectacle. This vision marked all facets of the Situationist project; they were involved in a civil war and fought for the execution of a gigantic catharsis where humankind would be liberated from capitalism, which had stolen its labor. "The only

12. For an analysis of the involvement of the Situationists in May '68, see Dumontier (1990). Giorgio Agamben (2000) writes about how the Situationists counteracted capitalism's attempt to depotentiate life.

useful thing left to do is to reconstruct society and life on other foundations” (Internationale situationniste 1962, 23).

Art As a Creative Resource: Artist Placement Group

At the present time, when there is much talk about the collaboration between art and business, the British organization Artist Placement Group appears as an interesting forerunner to many contemporary projects. The organization was created in 1965 by John Latham, Barbara Stevini, Jeffrey Shaw, and Barry Flanagan, with the purpose of placing artists in companies and public institutions where they were to collaborate with employees irrespective of normal hierarchies and traditional channels of command.¹³ Artists were to examine the flows of desire within the social relations of workplace and government departments. As artists, according to Latham and Stevini, operate on a longer time base than other groups in society and partake in a value system that is in sharp contrast to that of commerce—expression, not economic profitability, is the value of art—they were capable of registering the unfurling dynamic of the workplace and potentially to highlight alternative ways of working and being involved in the activities going on in the factory or institution.

The idea of the placement was inspired by a wish for a different conception of the role of the artist in society. Following the dematerialization of the art object characteristic of conceptual art, it was, according to Artist Placement Group, necessary to try to give art a new role in society beyond the closed circuit of galleries, museums, and academies. Artist Placement Group wished to expand artistic freedom beyond the art institution. According to the group, art was a creative resource to be used throughout society. Art should not only be connected to everyday life, but also included in the production process. Artist Placement Group was thus an example of how conceptual art was taken in a more committed, interdisciplinary direction that nonetheless could not transcend the conception of the artist as somehow outside politics.

Using the so-called time-base theory that John Latham had developed in the early 1960s, Artist Placement Group sought to leave behind a traditional, object-focused art production and instead move toward an artistic practice more open to the participation of the spectator, an artistic practice with which a different kind of creation could be realized. In essence, the goal of art was to create a different conception of time, not objects. Through the placement of artists in industry and public institutions, a different time perspective could be created. The artists would introduce a time perspective that was very different from the one normally adopted in industry where production and profit are the immediate goals. A much longer time perspective could be introduced through the placement of an artist not subject to the traditional demands of profit and efficiency. Collaboration between the artist and the company or institution was not intended to follow any pre-agreed plan, and the

13. For presentations of Artist Placement Group, see Sachsse (1992), Slater (2000), and Walker (1976).

placements were not intended to result in an artwork. The concrete character of the collaboration was to develop during the placement. As it was stated in one of the pamphlets Artist Placement Group produced, "The context decides half the work."

Artist Placement Group wanted to release the creativity of art, yet the organization never defined the purpose of this action: For whom, and to what purpose? On the one hand, it was clear that Artist Placement Group could not allow industry to instrumentalize art. On the other hand, the art institution could not remain the main context for the activities of Artist Placement Group, and the values and ideas of art institutions could not define the nature of the collaboration and the placement. At the same time, it was obviously the group's intention to challenge the means/end rationality of industry by confronting it with the creativity it saw as the essence of art. The attempt to balance these perspectives was eagerly criticized by other artists and critics, such as the German artist Gustav Metzger (1972), who lashed out at Artist Placement Group for lacking political ambition. It had, according to Metzger, developed a "language of survival" that ultimately revealed the conservative nature of its project. Latham and Artist Placement Group replied that any political engagement in favor of, for instance, communism would only destroy the creativity of art. All political positions were characterized by a limited perspective whereas art made possible a completely different perspective when it was introduced into contexts external to it. We can perhaps look at this ambiguousness as yet another example of the paradoxical nature of the avant-garde, according to whom art has a special potential but only insofar as it is realized outside the institution of art.

Artist Placement Group was an attempt to give art a new role; the project was a radical "answer" to the question of the relationships between artist, artwork, and audience. Through placement, art became a concrete but open cooperation between a person with creative capabilities and workers in a company or an institution. In a letter to the Secretary to the Chairman of the Arts Council, C. F. Barley of the Civil Service Department at Whitehall wrote:

Their intention is not that of the traditional relationship of patronage. Rather, they seek to have an artist involved in the day-to-day work of an organization. The latter may be expected to benefit in a variety of ways. These may vary from contributions to the creation of some concrete object to new ideas about work methods. Generally, Artist Placement Group's aim is an attempt to bridge the gap between artists and people at work so that each may gain from the other's perspective and approaches to an activity. (in Walker 1995, 98)

Following the experiments of Latham and other contemporary artists, Artist Placement Group sought to change the meaning of art. The artist should no longer create self-sufficient and self-referential objects, but rather, should engage in different kinds of cooperation with actors outside the institution of art. In an attempt to stress this transformation, Artist Placement Group replaced the term "artist" with "incidental person." According to Latham, the incidental person occupied a "third ideological position" between workers and managers and was therefore able to create a much more complete representation of not just the individual company, but society in general (Latham 1976, 170). Through the placements, Artist Placement

Group sought to question the social function of art and, at the same time, to critique the social isolation of the artist. But even though it tried to question the role of art, in many respects it ended up confirming the traditional, Romantic role of the artist. The freedom and independence of the incidental person looked remarkably similar to the freedom and autonomy with which the artist was endowed in bourgeois capitalist society. The naïveté was evident in most of the documents Artist Placement Group wrote: "It should not be unreasonable to predict that as a result of carefully directed dissemination of the basic concepts [developed by APG], in 20 years some thousands of millions of people will have their lives significantly improved, qualitatively, as compared with their condition today" (Artist Placement Group 1971, 8).

In the period between 1969 and the beginning of the 1980s, Artist Placement Group was able to place artists in companies like British Steel Corporation and institutions like British Rail and the Department of Health. Contrary to the intentions of Artist Placement Group, many placements resulted in the creation of rather traditional artworks, with the company providing the artist with material and technical knowledge. Very often the artists were only able to collaborate with managers, not with workers, but in some instances a more experimental collaboration was established. Often these collaborations ended in misunderstanding and disagreement, as was the case with Stuart Brisley and New Town of Peterlee in the north of England. Brisley wanted to write an alternative history about the local working class; he did succeed in founding a small museum in the city but, according to Brisley, the city council prevented the presentation of class conflicts in the region (Brisley 1972). Besides the concrete placements and the negotiations preceding them, Artist Placement Group in this period created pamphlets in which they mimicked and twisted the aesthetics that characterized the business world. In addition, the organization participated in a number of exhibitions where they tried to transform the art space into a zone for social research.

Political Activism and Autonomous Art: Art Workers' Coalition

Although a number of artists, several of whom were associated with abstract expressionism, already in 1965 had published the proclamation "End Your Silence" against the war in Vietnam, it was with the founding of Art Workers' Coalition in 1969 that a truly critical artistic public sphere was established in New York.¹⁴ At that time, conceptual art was not yet integrated into the institutions of art and presented itself as an "internal" challenge to the commodity status of art by replacing traditional artistic media (such as painting, sculpture, and prints) with photocopies, photographs, and text; further, the serial, reductive, and geometrical forms of minimal art rejected anthropomorphism, composition, and illusion. These new art forms were, in different ways, alternatives to the still dominant modernism of Clement Greenberg. As a representative of the "Old Left," Greenberg looked upon art as the only sphere

14. For an account of the making of "End Your Silence," see Craven (1997, 18–9). For presentations of Art Workers' Coalition, see Lippard (1972, 2002).

in which it was possible to articulate freedom from and resistance to an omnipresent capitalist system. Art was to consolidate its autonomy and refrain from any direct political engagement; it was through this absence of politics that art could keep capitalist kitsch and Soviet propaganda at bay. This position was contradictory, according to the new conceptual artists who were increasingly interested in questions concerning the relationships between political, economic, and cultural power. Following student protests against the conservative function of the university, the artists set out to critique local museums for being part of a political-economic system that was responsible for the war in Vietnam.¹⁵

In the late 1960s, the political situation in the United States became critical. In 1967, more than 90,000 people demonstrated in Washington against the war in Vietnam that, at that time, had resulted in the deaths of more than 30,000 American soldiers and several hundred thousand Vietnamese. In several cities spread across the nation, race riots broke out between blacks and the police, and shops were burned down or robbed. On many universities there were also riots, buildings were occupied, and bombs went off. In 1968, both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., were killed. The following year, the protests culminated in a demonstration in Washington, D.C., where more than 900,000 people expressed their opposition to the war in Vietnam. These and related events forced artists into a more active relation to the political situation. Artists were pushed by historical developments taking place, forcing them to consider the relationship between art and politics and to ask questions like: What is the role of art in connection with the different protests that blacks, women, and students are organizing? What is the relation between the war in Vietnam and the acquisition and exhibition strategies of the major art museums in the United States?

In this maelstrom of events, Art Workers' Coalition came into existence. The organization was founded following an incident at the Museum of Modern Art on the third of January 1969, when the artist Takis removed his sculpture *Télé-Sculpture* from the exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*. Takis removed his work because the museum had not informed him that it would also include a sculpture from its collection in the exhibition. With a small group of helpers, Takis removed his sculpture and demanded that the museum not show the work without his consent. Following the incident, discussion broke out in the art world on how to force museums to let artists participate in the management of art institutions. Artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Joseph Kosuth, Jon Hendricks, Leon Golub, and Nancy Spero were active participants in the meetings. The organization, which quickly got the name Art Workers' Coalition, was a loosely structured pressure group without a designated leadership that organized demonstrations and meetings where artists and critics discussed how to press for changes in museum policies. Wanting to force museums to give artists more power over their works, the organization demanded substantial representation of artists on museum

15. For an analysis of the relationship between the "Old Left" and the "New Left," see Wald (1987). For a presentation of the way this "conflict" influenced the discussion in the art world in the United States in the 1960s, see Frascina (1999).

boards and pressed for the setting aside of gallery space for women and minority artists.

On 10 April, Art Workers' Coalition organized an open hearing attended by more than three hundred people, at which several artists and critics spoke on the policies of the local museums and demanded the establishment of free entrance. Some speakers expressed a more radical position, like Carl Andre: "The solution to the artist's problems is not getting rid of the turnstiles at the Museum of Modern Art, but in getting rid of the art world. This artists can do by trusting one another and forming a true community of artists" (in Art Workers' Coalition 1972, n.p.).¹⁶ According to Andre, artists should reject the institution of art and create an alternative and democratic artistic public sphere by withdrawing their artworks from circulation. Without artworks there would be no exhibitions; there would be no art scene and no economic transactions. Instead, it would be possible to develop an alternative structure where artists had more control over their art.

Although the idea of developing an alternative public sphere beyond the institution of art was presented at the meeting, not many artists wished to go that far. It was one thing to criticize museums with their shows and acquisitions, another to abandon the institution of art. Only very few members were willing to go for the grand synthesis and risk the end of art. They might call themselves workers, but they were also artists. The specific connection between political activism and the individual member's art practice was never suggested. Rather, it was left to the individual member to decide whether she or he opted for one or two texts: on the one hand, the grand synthesis of art and politics, and on the other, two separate texts, a political commitment as citizen and the relative autonomy of artistic practice. It was never specified how members were to connect political commitment in favor of the end of the war in Vietnam to a career in the art world. Most artists chose the moderate and perhaps more realistic solution: art on the one hand, political commitment on the other.¹⁷ Some sought to connect political commitment with art and founded groups like Women Artists and Revolution and Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation. But in comparison with the Situationists and to Artist Placement Group, Art Workers' Coalition comes off looking more moderate and "realistic." The museum remained the main focus.

The Disruption of Everyday Life: Then and Now

The Situationists were part of the postwar breakup of surrealism, having a relation to French postwar Marxism and existentialism. As such, they predated conceptual and performance art by a decade. In addition, the Situationist organization played an

16. According to Philip Leider, who was at that time editor of *Artforum*, it was he who actually wrote the text Andre presented at Open Hearing. See the interview with Leider in Newman (2000, 267–8).

17. As one of the leading members of Art Workers' Coalition, Lucy Lippard formulates it in retrospect: "[F]ew individual artists used their political experiences directly in their work" (1984, 350).

active role in the radicalization of workers, students, and other groups during the 1960s. The forced involvement with historical development, coupled with a lingering avant-gardistic self-centeredness, make the Situationists appear a hinge between the politicized aesthetics of the interwar period and the institutionalized dissent of the postwar period. Compared to both Artist Placement Group and Art Workers' Coalition, the Situationist International appears grandiose with its "overpoliticized" and bombastic renunciation of art. The Situationists wanted to leave the art world in favor of revolutionary politics. Even though Artist Placement Group and various members of the Art Workers' Coalition were interested in social, economic, and political questions, and were critical of the institution of art, they remained firmly within its confines, continually appearing within its galleries, museums, and journals.

Artist Placement Group was never as radical as the Situationists; they did not feel it was necessary to leave art altogether. Instead, it was necessary to give art a new social function by placing artists outside the narrow limits of art, which, according to Artist Placement Group, meant placing artists in industry and public institutions. The artist had to leave his or her atelier and abandon the traditional role of an isolated genius to instead collaborate with workers, technicians, and employees in factories and institutions. In these collaborations, the process was more important than the end result, which would not necessarily take the shape of an artwork that could be signed and exhibited. In the United States, historical development forced artists and critics to get involved in political questions connected with the war in Vietnam, but it was only a few artists who were willing to go for the grand synthesis of art and politics. Most artists involved in Art Workers' Coalition wished to use the contradictory autonomy of art to create objects and images that could hopefully confuse the dominant codes. It was necessary to take a position on the war in Vietnam, and to question issues pertaining to sexism and racism, but without letting this positioning decide the look and composition of the individual artwork. How to react as an artist to the escalating political questions remained an open question. Finally, the group refrained from making any explicit connection between political activism and the artworks made by its members.

Each in its own way, these three groups can be read as ambiguous attempts to continue the avant-garde's demand for an advanced political art. The Situationists radicalized the historical avant-garde's critique of the alienation of art and attempted to galvanize the varying forces of revolutionary movement. As a collaboration with the trades and industries, the British Artist Placement Group banked on the realization of a great Utopian vision somewhere in the future. The members of Art Workers' Coalition were split between skepticism toward social Utopianism and a desire for a new public. No matter how we approach the question of art and politics and the afterlife of the avant-garde, whether we do so as historians or partisans, we need to analyze the status of this question today. The interventionist art of the 1960s is a privileged object for such an analysis because the accelerated political development of the time both necessitated and complicated the attempt to unite art and politics. The project of the historical avant-garde might be further away now than in the 1960s, where it was already beginning to fade, but it continues to haunt contemporary art and forces it to ask itself whether it is possible to organize the sensible in another way.

In retrospect, we might characterize the different projects as either revolutionary or reformist. The Situationists went for the grand solution. Individual artworks had to make way for a sweeping revolutionary transformation where capitalist society and its state- and money-form were rejected in favor of a different life characterized by creativity and agency; limited aesthetic gains were of no importance. Artist Placement Group wanted to break away from the self-containment of the modernist art institution, not as an attempt to abolish the institution of art but in an attempt to use art beyond the traditional sphere of art whereby different experiences would become possible in everyday life. Art Workers' Coalition tried to mobilize the art world against the Vietnam War and fought against repressive museum policies. Neither Artist Placement Group nor Art Workers' Coalition wanted to leave the institution of art, but sought to reform it from the inside. Both these projects sought to use the institution by staging political and social issues within the context of art. The Situationists found such an approach to be useless: it was nothing but a spectacle of critique, not the necessary critique of the spectacle.

This is probably what we are left with today: on the one hand, the bombastic critique of the institution of art; and on the other, the necessity of using this institution and the possibilities it does offer us. As independent, left-wing political cultures have been declining during the past decades, the art institution has presented itself as a platform where social and cultural practices can be debated and created. Following the narrowing of public space and the lack of political invention, the art world has been one of the places where the reconstruction of a political space takes place. But as the Situationists never got tired of repeating, we of course have to be very skeptical of the way the institution of art produces and stages the emergent and critical. Whether this necessarily means abandoning the art institution is a difficult question. On the one hand, one can argue that we have to make do with what we have at our disposal, including the art institution as a contradictory and potentially productive space for political and cultural practice. On the other hand, it might also be time to revisit the Situationist's theory about capitalist society's ability to recuperate every subversive gesture in favor of the accumulation of capital.

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