

Rereading *An Anti-Catalog*: Radical Art History and the Decline of the Left

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On December 14, 1975, a newly-formed group calling itself "Artists Meeting for Cultural Change" (or AMCC) published an open letter "to the American Art Community" to protest the Whitney Museum's plans for its upcoming celebration of the Bicentennial. The letter, which was signed by nine artists' groups and thirty-six individual artists and critics, charged that the Whitney's decision to exhibit the collection of John D. Rockefeller III under the title "Three Centuries of American Art," constituted "a blatant example of a large cultural institution writing the history of American art as though the last decade of cultural and social reassessment had never taken place." The letter recalled how nine days earlier, artists Benny Andrews and Rudolf Baranik, and critic Lucy Lippard had met with Tom Armstrong, the Whitney's director, "to discuss our objections to this show," and had run up against "bureaucratic diversionary tactics." Armstrong, who brought a lawyer to the meeting, had declared, "I'm not willing to go into a dialogue with you or your groups." Andrews, Baranik, and Lippard, who were calling for a bicentennial celebration including "the various facets of American art . . . art of dissent; art by minorities; an adequate representation of art by women," left "completely dissatisfied." An art community meeting was called a few days later "to discuss possible actions against the Whitney and other museums and cultural institutions around the nation which are using the Bicentennial to reinforce the values, taste, prestige and power of the ruling class."

For those of us who were involved in these proceedings, the *dramatis personae* as well as the drama itself recall familiar features of the struggles of the period. On one side, a predictably intransigent "establishment," with in this case Tom Armstrong playing the role of heavy; on the other, protesters exhibiting a sort of utopian indignation, calling simultaneously for reform and

revolution: demanding that the Whitney hire African-American and other minority curators, and exhibit works by women and minorities--reforms to some extent conceded in subsequent years; and, at the same time, asking for a consideration of "broader social and cultural issues: the prevailing view of art as a commodity in this society, what it means to participate in Official Culture, the responsibility of the artists' community to the general public, and whether the current cultural institutions are the proper mediators between artist and public, communities, and their culture." Revolution, in other words.

AMCC's politics thus represented a characteristic mid-1970s muddle. For radicals, the breakdown of the Civil Rights movement, the dissolution of the New Left, and the end of the War in Vietnam led to aimlessness and drift. Among liberals, the war along with the Watergate scandals resulted in a massive loss of faith in government as an agent of reform or change. Cut loose from their political moorings, art world liberals and radicals struck unlikely alliances. From 1975 until 1977 (when he was fired from his post as editor), Max Kozloff opened the pages of *Artforum* to leftist thinkers. *October*, founded in 1976 by a group of writers dissatisfied with the leadership at *Artforum*, evoked the hoary equation between revolution and avant-garde art with its name, which referred to the Bolshevik Revolution, and to an imagined revolution in the arts. Well-established artists joined forces with leftists to combat art world racism and sexism in such groups as the Art Workers Coalition, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and the Ad Hoc Women's Artists Committee.

AMCC was very much a part of this historical moment. Compounded of unstable materials, it could not last for long. After a year of feverish meetings of which too many were devoted to wrangling over the group's identity and purpose, it fell apart in January, 1977, in a bruising final debate over "principles of unity." Despite its vast--one might say megalomaniacal--aspirations, AMCC failed to ignite a national protest movement in the arts. Although it achieved something of a presence in Soho through posters advertising its weekly open meetings,

its one enduring accomplishment was the protest it mounted against the Whitney's Rockefeller exhibition.

In its open letter, AMCC announced it would be picketing the Whitney on January 3, 1976. It also described "additional strategies" including "picketing to coincide with key American history holidays, alternative street exhibitions and an alternative catalogue, a slide show for educational purposes and letters to Congresspersons." Of these "strategies," AMCC followed through with picket lines on several occasions including the opening of the Rockefeller show on September 15], and the creation of "the alternative catalogue," which eventually took the title "*an anti-catalog*."

The *anti-catalog* was the work of fifteen artists and two art-historians drawn mainly from the ranks of AMCC. Calling itself "The Catalog Committee of AMCC," the committee took almost a year to produce an eighty-page book containing articles and documents. Originally conceived as a critique of art historian E.P. Richardson's catalog for the Rockefeller show--at a meeting in April, 1976, one of the committee members argued for the "purity" of simply republishing Richardson's catalog with critical annotations--the committee slowly evolved ideas for pictorial essays that would encompass such topics as native American art, African-American art, art by women, critiques of pervasive class bias in the art world, and critical examinations of cultural institutions. Because some topics outstripped its abilities, the committee asked the Native American artist Jimmy Durham to contribute a text, and the African-American historian Gerald Horne to collaborate on an article. Strongly influenced by John Berger's quasi-Marxist *Ways of Seeing*, a then current paperback which attempted to reach a popular readership through imaginative combinations of words and images, the catalog committee concerned itself with the problem of audience and accessibility. The book that resulted, a product of collective work and an almost non-hierarchical editorial and design process, was visually striking if, inevitably, somewhat uneven.

The committee's self-consciousness about collective work and its determination to see the *anti-catalog* through to publication resulted in bonding between committee members as well as a growing distance between a cohesive and focused committee and an increasingly fractious and solipsistic AMCC (some of whose members began to voice suspicion about the catalog committee's work and motives). The committee itself encompassed a broad spectrum of political philosophies ranging from liberalism and left-wing populism to Trotskyism, anarchism and council communism. Discussions at the committee's weekly meetings could be quite lively. Not every committee member was happy with the positions the committee as a whole arrived at, but something approaching a shared sense of purpose and respect for the collective process tended to moderate potentially divisive political disputes.

Politically, the *anti-catalog* was very much a product of its mid-1970s art world milieu, an admixture of reform and revolution, of deracinated liberalism and free-floating radical critique. Art historically, the *anti-catalog* was far ahead of its time. The mid-1970s represented a low point in the field as a conservative profession, still traumatized by the cold war and the witch hunt mentality of the 1950s, worked to maintain a cordon sanitaire between art and its historical and political contexts. This general failure of historical knowledge and imagination--a pervasive ahistoricism--led inevitably to elementary errors and ludicrous observations in the work of prominent practitioners. Thus in *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, a leading text of the period, Barbara Novak described women factory workers carrying lunch pails in Winslow Homer's *Morning Bell* of c. 1872, as "milkmaids"; or, to take another example, John Wilmerding, in his Pelican History of American Art (published in time for the Bicentennial), remarked without further comment that the presence of blacks in Eastman Johnson's *Negro Life at the South* of 1859 signaled the artist's interest in "a typically American subject." E. P. Richardson, who as a curator during the 1940s and 1950s had played a pioneering role in developing the field of American art, filled his catalog of the Rockefeller collection with

anodyne and sycophantic remarks exemplifying what the *anti-catalog* described as a “characteristic bias.” To take two brief examples: In a discussion of John Singleton Copley’s *Mrs. Daniel Sargent of 1763*, Richardson wrote that

Copley won his first success as a painter of elegance. The people of his time lived by a formal code of manners: their dress was stately and beautiful; their idea of portraiture, shared by artists and sitters alike, was formed by the works of English painters like Hudson and Highmore. [Etc.]

In a commentary on Winslow Homer’s *The Bright Side* of 1865, Richardson failed to mention that the “soldiers” (actually teamsters) in the painting are African-Americans, or that Homer’s caricaturing portrayal promoted the racism commonplace in the north during the Civil War.

To Richardson’s blandly ahistorical account of the history of American art, the *anti-catalog* responded with wit and historical polemic. Some examples: in “Mr. Catlin and Mr. Rockefeller Tame the Wilderness,” Jimmy Durham compressed into two pages a history of injustice and struggle, arguing that “Art, from ‘high art’ to illustrations in penny-dreadful novels, was one of the major tools the bosses used to further the mythology they invented to fool people into believing that the ‘savage’ Indians had no right to the land.” “Demystifying American Art” took on Richardson’s text in detail, examining how American art has been employed “to support a mythic version of American history.” “The Love of Art and the Love of Public Relations” meditated on art collecting and how “philanthropy in the form of cultural charity is . . . an extremely effective way of shaping the nation’s perception of itself and its history.” “Black Art and Historical Omission” argued that “like the experience of women and the poor, the history of Black people has been scrupulously forgotten--unwritten into American history and art history.” “Looking for Women in the Rockefeller Collection” explored the implications of the continuing omission of works by women artists (out of 104 paintings in the Rockefeller collection, only one was by a woman, predictably Mary Cassatt). The *anti-catalog* also contained a selection of

documents including an exchange of letters between Benny Andrews and a befuddled E. P. Richardson, who sought to defend John D. Rockefeller III's rights as "a private collector"; and a letter from the Whitney Museum's librarian addressed "Dear Sir or Madam" requesting a copy of the *anti-catalog*.

From the viewpoint of the history of American art, the *anti-catalog*'s preoccupation with issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity made it a prophetic document. Today, as everyone here is aware, scholars routinely examine the connections between American art and its historical contexts, taking into consideration such issues as the representation of race and the construction of gendered identities. To that extent, the *anti-catalog*'s radicalism has become an expected feature of academic art history. But I would stress that in its day, the *anti-catalog* was profoundly unacademic, not only because it sought to address a popular audience (whether it succeeded or not is another question); but also because it never lost sight of the political implications of its critique. Employing a now outmoded political-cultural lexicon, the *anti-catalog* hammered away at the ideologies and interests that drove "Official Art" and "ruling class" culture. As the committee wrote in its description of its project,

we share the belief that culture should no longer exist merely as an extension of the economic interests or the personal "tastes" of the wealthy and powerful. Nor can we hope to transform culture outside of a struggle to transform the society from which it springs. Strong words that have lost none of their relevance or force.