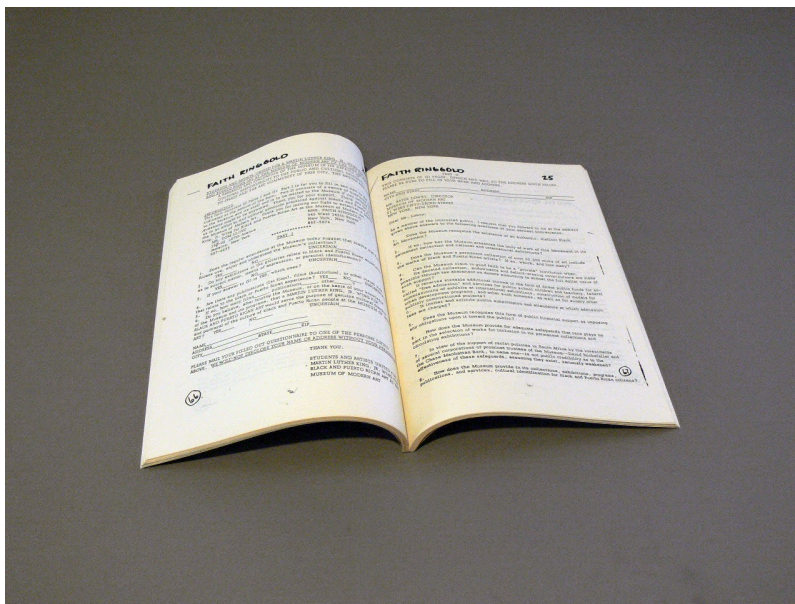


# Art Workers Coalition | Open Hearing

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Art Workers Coalition

*Open Hearing*

New York City, USA: Self-published, 1969

142 pp., 8.5 x 11", thick side-stapled wrappers

Edition size unknown

On the afternoon of January 3rd, 1969, the Greek sculptor Takis Vassilakis, accompanied by Willoughby Sharp and a few other accomplices, visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York to unplug and de-install the artist's own work, *Tele-Sculpture*. The piece, owned by the Museum, was included in the exhibition without consultation by the artist, who felt that it no longer represented his practice. They placed a call to alert the museum's director, and staged a sit-in protest in the Museum's garden. Hundreds of handbills were distributed to gallery goers, with a list of four complaints:

1. The exhibition of living artists without their consent.
2. The degree of control exercised by museums, galleries and private collector over the works of living artists.
3. The lack of consultation between museum authorities and artists, particularly with regard to the maintenance and installation of work.
4. The unauthorized use of photographs and other material for publicity purposes.\*

Director Bates Lowery came down to meet with the group, and agreed to the permanent removal of the piece from the exhibition. He also told them that he would "seriously consider" the group's demands that the Museum host a public hearing to discuss their

concerns over "the current relationship between artist and museum".

This event marked the birth of a group that would later be known as the Art Workers Coalition, or AWC, and would come to include over 300 artists, critics, writers, and arts administrators who sought the reform of large cultural institutions and fought for the rights of artists.

In the fliers that Takis distributed, he called the protest "the first in a series of acts against the stagnant policies of art museums all over the world." He continued: "Let us unite, artists with scientists, students with workers, to change these anachronistic situations into information centres for all artistic activities," thus tying his personal discontent to a larger disenfranchisement artists felt in relation to museums and institutions. By the end of the month the original six were joined by art critic Gregory Battock, and several artists from the Howard Wise gallery, including Hans Haacke and Wen-Ying Tsar.

The new expanded group submitted a list of thirteen demands to Lowery, which included calling for free admission to museums, opening hours that can accommodate working people, and better representation regarding race and gender. Lowery responded a couple of weeks later that he was recommending to the Board of Trustees that a Special Committee on Artist Relations be appointed.

On February 22, the group, now joined by Carl Andre, Joseph Kosuth and Lucy Lippard, held the first of many meetings at the Chelsea Hotel, to determine their next move. Further letters were exchanged with Lowery, but his responses were deemed unsatisfactory so the group staged increasingly large protests outside of the MoMA (including the distribution of counterfeit admission tickets designed by Joseph Kosuth),

*The Open Public Hearing on the Subject: What Should Be The Program of The Art Worker's Regarding Museum Reform, What Should be Done to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers' Coalition* was announced for April 10th, with a flyer that read:

"East [sic] person who wishes to speak will be assigned, upon arrival, an approximate time for speaking. Any witness who does not wish to wait or return for his turn, may give the secretary a brief statement to be read at the appropriate time."

The event attracted an attendance of almost 400, and over 80 art workers read statements. Richard Artschwager used his two minutes at the podium to light small firecrackers.

The 1969 publication *Open Hearing* features a collection of mimeographed copies of artists' statements from the event, as well as letters and other documents pertaining to the AWC. The index lists the following categories:

Structure of the Art Workers' Coalition

Alternatives to Museums and Art Institutions

Reforms of Art Institutions

Legal and Economic Relationships to Galleries and Museums  
Specific Proposals of Action  
Artists' Relationships to Society and other Philosophical Considerations  
Black and Puerto Rican Artists' rights

with most writings falling under multiple categories.

Carl Andre contributes a text entitled *A Reasonable and Practical Proposal for Artists who Wish to Remain Free Men in these Terrible Times*, Jean Toche calls for artists' participation in the running of all museums and Hans Haacke suggests the MoMA has become "an art-historical mausoleum". Kosuth quotes Oscar Wilde.

Seth Siegelaub notes that the only seemingly unique aspect of an artist is that he makes art and no one else does, and "this is where your leverage lies".

Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs and Michael Snow co-sign a letter demanding full autonomy for the MoMA's film department, and reasonable purchase and screening fees, as well as supporting other ideas popular within the group (free admission to the museum, for example).

Critic Alex Gross (who had previously written about the initial Takis Vassilakis protest for the The East Village Other) discusses a common situation in which secondary market works sell for exorbitant prices while the artist continues to live penniless, and suggests that an artist retains a "propriety interest in his work even after he has sold it". He proposes a royalty of between 10 and 33 percentage. Sol Lewitt argues that a living artist should retain rights over their works and that collectors would "in a sense, be custodians of that art".

Faith Ringold contributes a questionnaire on the topic of the museum experience for black and Puerto Rican visitors. The six questions can be answered YES, NO or UNCERTAIN. The document also calls for a Martin Luther King Jr. wing of the MoMA, as do several of the other contributions.

Lucy Lippard, while striking a somewhat more conciliatory tone, suggests that "the conventional museum is by nature too big, too bulky, too slow to keep track of and keep up with the studios in a time of such rapid change". Robert Barry notes that the very first word in the name MoMA is a lie, and suggests it could be abandoned altogether: "Why not work outside it and leave it to those who want it?".

Lee Lozana's handwritten contribution reads: "for me there can be no art revolution that is separate from a science revolution, a political revolution, an education revolution, a drug revolution, a sex revolution, or a personal revolution. i cannot consider a program of museum reforms without equal attention to gallery reforms and art magazine reforms which would aim to eliminate stables of artists and writers. i will not call myself an art worker but rather an art dreamer and i will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public."

These varying approaches ultimately led to the end of the AWC, in late 1971. Hans Haacke: “What one wants, the other objects to strenuously; e.g. one wants to destroy museums, the other wants to reform them or to use the museums as they are for his own artistic ends, and the third simply wants a piece of the pie.” Lucy Lippard wrote: “By the end of 1971, the AWC had died quietly of exhaustion, backlash, internal divisions . . . and neglect by the women, who had turned to our own interests.”

While the activities of the AWC lasted less than three years, many splinter groups continued: GAAG (the Guerilla Art Action Group, which consisted of Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks and Poppy Johnson), PRAWC (the Puerto Rican Art Workers’ Coalition), Women Artists in Revolution, The Emergency Cultural Government, Artists Meeting For Cultural Change, The Ad Hoc Women’s Artist Committee and the Art Strike.

The latter had organized the October 15th 1969 protest, *Moratorium of Art to End the War in Vietnam*, convincing the MoMA, the Whitney Museum, the Jewish Museum and a large number of commercial art galleries to close for the day. The Metropolitan Museum and the Guggenheim did not comply, but the MET did postpone an exhibition opening scheduled for that day, and the Guggenheim was picketed.

The coalition's activities eventually led to changes in how museums interact with artists, a contribution to the art world that is considered lasting in spite of the coalition's short three-year existence. The appointment of artists as trustees on Museum board of directors is increasingly commonplace.

The group can count many other successes, both directly and indirectly, immediate and long-lasting:

MoMA officially affiliated with the Museum Division of the Distributive Workers of America union, in May 1971. Their two-week strike in August of that year resulted in a wage increase, job security, and a greater voice for staff in policy decisions.

The New York State Council on the Arts created the “Ghetto Arts Program” aimed at black and Puerto Rican artists. Some of the language and approaches used are cringe-worthy now, but can be viewed as initial steps towards building community-based arts programming.

A direct result of the Art Workers’ agitations, MoMA began a free admission day in February of 1970. On the first of these the museum tripled its attendance, and the New York Times reported that the crowd “was younger and less white than usual, and included many family groups.” Many New York City museums now offer free admission on select days (for a list, click [here](#)) and there are over 50 museums in the UK with a completely free admission policy (click [here](#)).

In Toronto, The AGO has free entry (to the permanent collection) on Wednesday nights from 6 - 8:30 pm. A few years ago the Power Plant accepted sponsorship to ensure free admission during the summer, and recently this has been expanded to a year-round policy, courtesy of

BMO Financial Group.

Other than token evenings, gallery hours still seem aimed at vacationing tourists and those with non-9 to 5 employment. How contemporary art hopes to compete with other culture (cinema, television, music, sporting events, drinking, etc.) and close at 6pm continues to baffle.

In 1976, California enacted the Resale Royalty Act, which (under certain conditions) ensured that artists were paid 5% of resale prices for the duration of their lifetime, and 20 years afterwards (when the proceeds would go to their heirs). The law was struck down as unconstitutional in 2012 and is currently pending appeal.

Almost 60 countries now, including most of Europe, have laws that allot a small percentage of the hammer price of resold art works to the artist. The figure varies from a fraction of a per cent to five per cent, depending on the sale price. The notion of "droit de suite," or the artist's resale right was first proposed in France in 1894 and became law in 1920. but was only introduced to the U.K. in 2006, means that an artist, who has previously sold works for low prices, can profit from rising prices on subsequent sales of those pieces. The law applies after death too, so that an artist's heirs would get a share until copyright expires, 75 years after death in most of these countries.

In terms of the initial concern by Takis, there has been considerable movement within institutions towards consultation with living artists. The Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 (VARA) affords artists certain moral rights regarding their work that they did not have before, including "the right to prevent distortion, mutilation, or modification that would prejudice the author's honor or reputation". In Canada, the (Michael) Snow v. The Eaton Centre Ltd in 1982 case awarded artists rights over the integrity of their work, which continues to reverberate today.

Regarding issues of race and gender, it is noteworthy that one of the few recent titles to tackle the activities of the AWC, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* by Julia Bryan-Wilson, largely omits the contributions of black and Puerto Rican artists, who (as can be seen in *Open Hearing*) played critical roles in the efforts of the group. The fight for the rights of women artists was contentious even within the group, and reportedly many objected strongly to the addition of the word 'sexism' in the name *New York Art Strike against War, Repression, Racism and Sexism*.

A fairly recent study of eight selected museums notes that in the 2000s only 28% of museum solo exhibitions were by women artists. This figure, while outrageous, is still a better gender balance than index of this publication.

The legacy of the AWC can also include subsequent New York City art activism, ranging from the Guerrilla Girls to Occupy Museums, a branch of the Occupy movement who have held several protests inside MoMA. Their mission statement:

WE OCCUPY MUSEUMS TO RECLAIM SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL CULTURE BY AND FOR THE 99%. ART AND CULTURE ARE THE SOUL OF THE COMMONS. ART IS NOT A LUXURY!

and actions against union-busting practices of auction houses whose board members also sit on the MoMA board, indicate a continuity with the work of the AWC more than four decades prior (visit their site, [here](#)).

In addition to *Open Hearing*, The AWC self-published another volume, titled *Documents 1*. Both are available as PDFs at the Primary Information site, [here](#).

Lucy Lippard notes, in her firsthand account of the AWC, *The Art Workers' Coalition: Not A History* (November 1970), that the proceeds from these two publications (around \$500) were given to “a Biafran woman who delivered a particularly stirring plea at an AWC meeting”. Lippard’s *Not A History* was reprinted in her book *Get the Message: A Decade Of Art For Social Change*, which can be read [here](#).

\* A similar battle was waged in Canada, more than a full year prior to the AWC. In the fall of 1967, the National Gallery of Canada wrote to 130 Canadian artists requesting permission to reproduce their artwork in slide images for an exhibit entitled *300 Years of Canadian Art*.

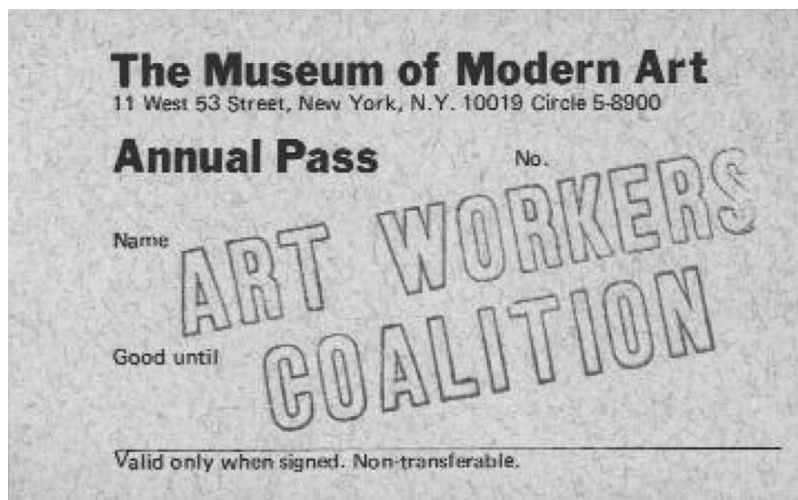
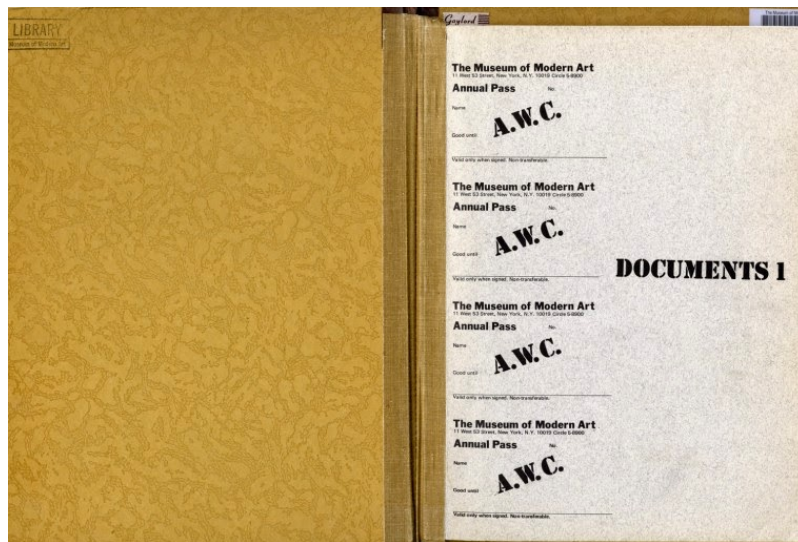
Painter Jack Chambers noticed that the letters also indicated that if the artist’s permission was not received in time, the project would continue with their assumed support. He replied with a request for compensation, pointing out that the gallery would profit from the reproduction of his work, even as an educational product. He copied his reply to other artists asked to participate and encouraged them to also reply in kind. Because of the pressure from this letter writing campaign the National Gallery was forced to respond. By cancelling the project.

Chambers, aided by Tony Urquhart and Kim Ondaatje, continued to promote the idea that artists should be paid for their work. “The first time that Kim and I went up to Montreal and met with the Canadian Art Museum Directors’ Organization,” Urquhart recalls, “they said ‘We agree, yes it’s a wonderful thing, but our institution just doesn’t have the budget.’ They played violins.” He proposed to the Montreal Museum Director that instead of hosting twenty contemporary exhibits in a year, they host nineteen and use the last budget to pay the artists.

This led to the founding of CARFAC (Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens) in 1968. By 1975, the Canada Council for the Arts made it a requirement for museums to pay fees as part of their funding eligibility criteria. Canada was the first country to adopt this standard, and other countries such as England and Australia followed suit by paying similar fees to artists.

(below: the other AWC publication, *Documents 1*, as seen in the Library collection of, ah, the MoMA,

Kosuth's forged Annual Pass, the 13 Demands and images of the AWC and later Occupy Museums protests).





### 13 DEMANDS

submitted to Mr. Bates Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, by a group of artists and critics on January 28, 1969.

1. The Museum should hold a public hearing during February on the topic "The Museum's Relationship to Artists and to Society", which should conform to the recognized rules of procedure for public hearings.
2. A section of the Museum, under the direction of black artists, should be devoted to showing the accomplishments of black artists.
3. The Museum's activities should be extended into the Black, Spanish and other communities. It should also encourage exhibits with which these groups can identify.
4. A committee of artists with curatorial responsibilities should be set up annually to arrange exhibits.
5. The Museum should be open on two evenings until midnight and admission should be free at all times.
6. Artists should be paid a rental fee for the exhibition of their works.
7. The Museum should recognize an artist's right to refuse showing a work owned by the Museum in any exhibition other than one of the Museum's permanent collection.
8. The Museum should declare its position on copyright legislation and the proposed arts proceeds act. It should also take active steps to inform artists of their legal rights.
9. A registry of artists should be instituted at the Museum. Artists who wish to be registered should supply the Museum with documentation of their work, in the form of photographs, news clippings, etc., and this material should be added to the existing artists' files.
10. The Museum should exhibit experimental works requiring unique environmental conditions at locations outside the Museum.
11. A section of the Museum should be permanently devoted to showing the works of artists without galleries.
12. The Museum should include among its staff persons qualified to handle the installation and maintenance of technological works.
13. The Museum should appoint a responsible person to handle any grievances arising from its dealings with artists.







