

The Story of Women Artists in Revolution, a Movement Against Patriarchy

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In a powerful 2019 essay in *Artforum*, Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett made the case that artists who were slated for exhibition in the 2019 Whitney Biennial had a moral obligation to withdraw their work in protest of the then vice chair of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Warren B. Kandors. Kandors had made himself very rich in part through his company, Safariland, which manufactures, among other weapons and police equipment, teargas used by governments to quash civil protests around the world. The authors cite as historical precedent the New York Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression, which kicked off in 1970 after Robert Morris closed his own Whitney exhibition in response to “the killing of students at Kent State, the suppression of the Black movement, and Nixon’s bombing of Cambodia.”

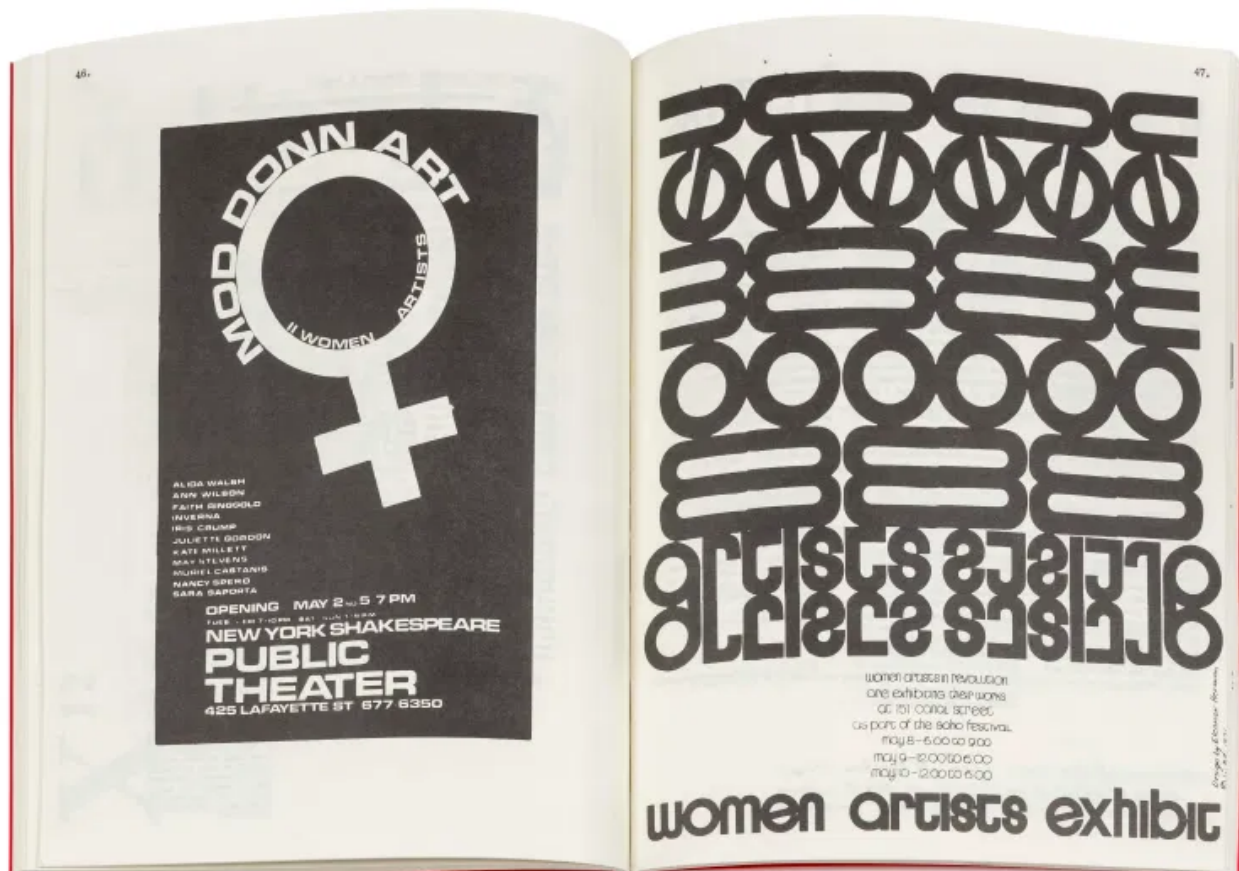
In May 1970, groups of activist artists and members of establishment art organizations gathered together in advance of this strike. Among those represented was Women Artists for Revolution or W.A.R., a feminist outgrowth of the Art Workers’ Coalition (A.W.C.), an organization fighting for racial and economic equality within the New York art scene. Cindy Nemser, an art critic and member of W.A.R., reported on the event for *The Village Voice*, writing that “neither Morris’s brand of moral indignation nor his proposals were strong enough for all those present.” W.A.R., along with the Art Students Coalition, the A.W.C., and Artists and Writers in Protest, voiced “dissatisfaction with what they considered rather mild palliatives.” This article is one of many primary sources compiled in *A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution*, first published in 1971 and reprinted in 2021 by Primary Information.

W.A.R. existed for a brief yet prolific period, from 1969 to 1971. The group ignited a robust movement against gender discrimination within, and widespread exclusion from, New York City’s patriarchal art industry, particularly by galleries and museums who saw art made by women as inherently illegitimate and therefore ineligible for serious consideration. W.A.R. set out to change this.

A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution is an archive much more than it is a book in any traditional sense. The documents, including correspondences, public statements, news clippings, flyers, reports, lists of demands, and provocative posters, are smartly compiled into a dense and focused study of W.A.R. and associated organizations’ varied efforts to advance women’s place in the art world. It includes no actual art beyond protest posters, scant information about the artists involved, and very little retrospective editorializing. Much like attending a rally, the book’s cumulative message is persistent, if not always particularly revelatory. In this way, it provides a loose sense of the group’s narrative

arc, its tenacious and often humorous rhetoric, its approaches to protest, advocacy, and community building, and perspective from affiliated artist groups on a breadth of concerns, ranging from racial discrimination to gentrification to the management structure at New York's leading museums. The choice not to showcase the W.A.R. artists' artwork in this publication reinforces the notion that it doesn't matter, really, whether a particular piece of art is any good; it matters that the structures in place enable good art to be seen and valued appropriately, and equally. (If you're craving more artwork and broader context on the movement, I'd recommend the 2010 documentary *!Women Art Revolution*, directed by Lynn Hershman Leeson.)

By compressing timelines and adopting a very focused scope, the book is able to present a clear call-and-response between artists and the powers that be. In one memorable exchange, the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists, an aligned group which included members of W.A.R., echoed the demand for 50 percent women representation at the 1970 Whitney Annual and condemned the museum's "lousy" feminist record. In a series of letters laden with ironic quotation marks, the Whitney declines their demands, calling them "inflammatory verbal gestures" rather than "inducements to enter into discussion." In response, members of the Ad Hoc Committee enumerated their opinion of the Whitney's "narrow outlook" on women's work, citing among other evidence, the existence of only four large one-woman shows since the museum opened its new building in the mid-1960s, two of which were by the same artist. "We repeat that we consider this a 'lousy' record."



A more public exchange began in February 1970 after Emily Genauer unfavorably reviewed a W.A.R. exhibition in the *New York Post*, criticizing the group’s “belligerent anger” and the general feminist premise of their efforts. Why must men believe in or respect their work, she questioned. Why can’t the women just believe in themselves? Juliette Gordon, a member of W.A.R. and A.W.C., responded with an open letter to Genauer in the *New York Element*, in which she told Genauer that her article was “not a criticism of an art exhibit” but rather a “self-revelation of the fomenting problems within yourself.” By 1975, Genauer had indeed come around. “Art is all, I said: who cares who painted what picture,” she reflected, “Only by year’s end I cared.” These moments animate the documents, make them feel briefly alive.

Another critical tension emerged from conflicting desires within the feminist movement to be included in the establishment and to fashion a new art world, one not built by and for the male gaze. The balancing act between storming out and fighting to get in was apparent as demands for equal representation in major museums coincided with calls for new kinds of art in new kinds of museums. This tension also existed within the larger artist-led movements at the time; In the aforementioned gathering preceding the New York Artists’ Strike, “radical demands were followed by suggestions for reform, which were followed by pleas for reason, which were followed by applause, cheers, boos, and hisses,” wrote Nemser.

The most radical demands presented in the book stand out as those that gesture toward a vision of American artistic and communal life that hasn't yet been achieved — one that's economically supportive, culturally rich, and socially just. They embody a more holistic ideal, informed by the understanding that barriers are systemic and economic, and that the limitations of a society are often limitations of the imagination. W.A.R. attempted to bring about this future through activism and community building, offering free mentorship to adolescent women and babysitting assistance, advocating for flexible working schedules, and putting on shows that upended hierarchical structures by exhibiting “Better known names with lesser known names with unknown names.”

Even as W.A.R. pushed for a more just art world, the articles and statements in this collection also reflect some of the constricted conceptions of gender and identity that were prevalent at the time. The documents include no mention of trans and nonbinary artists, and limited emphasis on the unique and disproportionate discrimination that women artists of color faced. The Women Students and Artists for Black Artists Liberation (WSABAL) appears in brief but significant moments in the documents, including as part of the conversation between feminist groups and the Whitney. After WSABAL demanded that 25 percent of artists in the Annual be Black women, Stephen E. Weil, the museum's Vice Chair, wrote to the Ad Hoc Committee, “You cannot be unaware of the impossible situation to which these proliferating demands, if met, would lead.” The impossible situation, we can only assume, is something closer to equal representation in the art world.

In light of the bureaucratic resistance to institutional change that these groups faced, it's not surprising that they began to embrace a more guerrilla approach to protest, planning small actions “calculated to annoy the museum” like printing fake tickets to infiltrate and protest the Whitney's Sculpture Annual exhibition, or distributing eggs emblazoned with their demands throughout the museum. There is a direct lineage from these strategies to today's protests within the art world, most notably Nan Goldin's impressive attack on the Sackler family, major donors to innumerable cultural organizations as well as the aggressive purveyors of the drug OxyContin. Goldin led protests that involved actions like “pelting the reflecting pool at the ancient Temple of Dendur with orange prescription bottles” at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

W.A.R. and the feminist movement of the '70s provoked a lot of conversations, incited awareness of, and action against, gender inequity in art, and precipitated lasting changes in the industry, but the scope of that change has thus far been finite. According to a recent report, between 2008 and 2018, only 11percent of the art acquired by America's top museums was by women, and of that only a measly 3 percent were African American women.

“What is the role of an alternate structure like ours,” inquired Jacqueline Skiles in a paper circulated to the Coordinating Board of the Women's Interart Center in 1973, warning against the slippery slope back to the status quo. Are we to “imitate the values and standards of those who have shut us out in the secret hope that they will finally take us to their bosoms”? Skiles wanted to nurture different modes of art and community, those rooted in

“our own standards and values,” and shared with those who shared their vision. In these documents we see a work in progress, the raw materials of history, the shimmering of dreams, a rash of opinions, the endless push and pull between what was, what is, and what could be.

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