

Remembrance of Revolutions Past

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Culture

March 04, 2021 • A 1973 document of feminist art activism holds a mirror to our present
[Lauren O’Neill-Butler](#)

A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution text by Lucy Lippard, Agnes C. Denes, Emily Genauer, Silvia Goldsmith, Grace Glueck, Poppy Johnson, Brenda Miller, Faith Ringgold, et al. Brooklyn, NY: Primary Information. 88 pages. \$20.

A sense of necessity, a foundation, and a strong community: these are just a few of the keys to effective activism. Though the New York–based collective Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) was short-lived, they burned bright for three years, and emerged in 1969 with these three elements in place. The group of artists, filmmakers, writers, critics, and cultural workers—which didn’t care if its acronym was militaristic, even while the United States pushed its imperialistic agenda in Vietnam—grew out of the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC). There was an “unstated need among women,” as WAR member Juliette Gordon once wrote, to create a splinter group, to take the AWC’s focus on economic and political reforms in the arts and put a much more precise point on it: that non-white, non-male artists needed representation in museums and they needed to be remunerated on the same scale as those with more privilege. Of course, this didn’t include *all* the ladies in the AWC—Lee Lozano famously decided to “boycott women” in 1971, not long after WAR protested at the Whitney, where Lozano was enjoying a solo show. While the AWC’s efforts have been nostalgically canonized, and its influence on contemporary arts activism is clear, much less has been written about WAR’s insurgent feminist politics and the generative connections—or disconnections—between now and then.

In 1971, WAR published a book of their manifestos, statements, correspondence, press, and reports, which was followed by a second edition in 1973. In early 2021, the latter was reprinted by Primary Information. Titled *A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution*, the eighty-eight-page primer is very much a product of its era—typewritten text, grainy images, xeroxed black-and-white ephemera—but it also holds up a mirror to our present. *HerStory* features several pages of flyers and newspaper clippings from the October 20, 1970, International Artists Demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was organized by a coalition of groups including WAR. Their concerns, such as “direct and indirect support by museums of racism, sexism, war and repression,” reverberate with issues still being worked through today, such as the formation of museum unions and greater accountability for art washing in cultural institutions. However, mid-pandemic, as class struggle is once again resurgent, it seems like we’re on the verge of new forms of revolt.

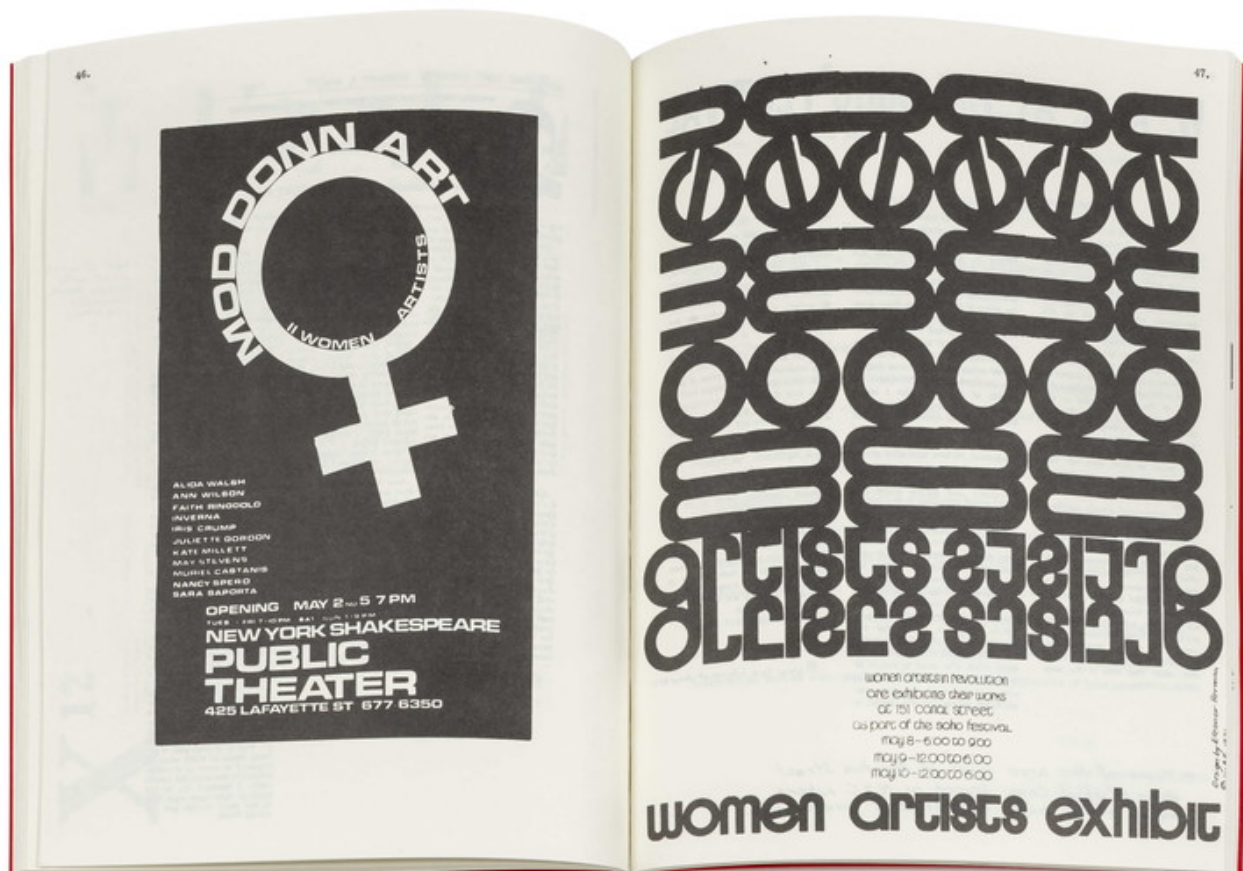
WAR regulars included Muriel Castanis, Agnes Denes, Silvia Goldsmith, Doloris Holmes,

A DOCUMENTARY HER STORY

Meriel Castanis
Iris Crump
Nancy Edelstein
Silvia Goldsmith
Juliette Gordon
Tigger Reading
Marilyn Rudd
May Stevens
Cindy Nemer
Doris O'Kane
Joyce Weinstein
Fran Cox
Sara Saporta
Stella Waitzkin
Susan Kleckner
Manalissa DeAsis
Nancy Spero
Ann Pollon
Ann Wilson
Inverna
Lil Picard
Therese Schwartz
Mary Ann Gillies
Janet McDevitt
and all the other women
who have helped
make this herstory
of W.A.R.
and the Womens Media Center
that printed the first
edition
© WOMENS INTERART CENTER, 1973

Poppy Johnson, Janet McDevitt, Doloris O’Kane, Sara Saporta, and Jacqueline Skiles. Members often worked with other assemblies: Lucy Lippard became active with the Ad Hoc

Women’s Art Committee; Faith Ringgold and her daughter Michele Wallace founded Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL); Goldsmith and Johnson participated in the Guerrilla Art Action Group (another splinter off the AWC). Crucially, WAR didn’t restrict itself to art-world reforms. It fought for structural change against capitalism and patriarchy, including abortion rights. The book offers images WAR collectively designed for a pro-choice demonstration on March 28, 1970, featuring screen-printed aprons emblazoned with text reading, “Is this uterus the property of N.Y. State?” That April, New York became one of the first states to legalize abortion, and, three years later, the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade*.



Spread from *A Documentary HerStory of Women Artists in Revolution*.

While some of these designs seem dated today—heavily essentialist or too invested in securing abortion rights through the state—the archive presented in *HerStory* has much to teach about coalition politics and effective tactics. In October 1970, comrades from WSABAL, WAR, and other assemblies formed the Ad Hoc Women’s Art Committee. Their goal was equal representation of women in the 1970 Whitney Sculpture Annual exhibition. (The 1969 Annual featured 143 artists; eight were women.) Following heated letters between the museum and the committee, along with regular onsite protests, the Whitney announced the

1970 exhibition as having more women than any past annual—22 percent (rising from the 5.5 to 10 percent of the previous years). Nevertheless, the group persisted, asking for 50 percent women, and 25 percent Black women: prior to the opening of the show on December 12, 1970, the committee printed fake tickets and distributed a forged press release stating that half the artists in the exhibition would indeed be women.

By 1971, the AWC was falling apart, in part due to the successes of such actions by splinter groups. As Lippard recounted in Julia Bryan-Wilson's book *Art Workers* (2009), "The women became politicized and the men went back to their careers." WAR continued to flourish, holding workshops in a former firehouse turned community center on East 11th Street. They received a \$5,000 grant from the New York State Council of the Arts to open the Women's Interart Center—only after they protested that their proposal was being ignored. The center was eventually awarded more funds and moved to West 52nd Street, where it offered numerous exhibitions, performances, screenings, lectures, and workshops. (It had an illustrious history until it was essentially shuttered due to gentrification in 2016.)

By 1972, WAR had officially disbanded as the center had become the primary project for some participants. In a handwritten postscript to the 1973 edition of *HerStory*, Skiles and McDevitt offer this sanguine takeaway: "We have realized many of our goals. The Women's Interart Center is a place where women not only create in our many workshops but also present their work to the public. . . . Things are slowly getting better!"

Perhaps too slowly. Despite the good work of so many (including the Guerrilla Girls), the sweeping move by feminists toward forging rooms of their own left behind regular protests—another key to effective activism. Intersectional values were also abandoned by some feminist groups, an additional lost root. I recently interviewed Howardena Pindell, a cofounder of AIR Gallery—the nonprofit women's cooperative art space founded in 1972—and she recalled how the majority-white group had "no empathy for issues of race." Meanwhile, many museums became de facto plutocratic organizations. By the 2010s, collectives such as Gulf Labor, Occupy Museums, and Decolonize This Place took action. In 2020, the Feminist Art Coalition successfully launched its program, which now serves 118 institutions in the US, but even the need for this kind of grassroots organizing shows there's still so much more to be done. *HerStory* is a timely invitation to feminists to think critically about how to reveal all situations of precarity under capitalism in a more long-term, lasting way.

Lauren O'Neill-Butler's forthcoming book, Let's Have a Talk: Conversations with Women on Art and Culture, will be published this year by Karma.

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