



Art Workers Want to Know^{*}

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The call for the Politics of Workers' Inquiry conference asked specifically for methodological contributions. I told a kind of ghost story about a tribe of phantoms who occasionally reappear. It concerned an organization called the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), formed in early 1969 after a spectacular protest in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Through its regular open meetings akin to the peoples' assemblies of recent times, the AWC aired grievances against museums and markets of art. A bill of particulars was drafted called the Ten Points. They also laid out a different conception of what it meant to participate in the art world. The idea of an 'art worker' contained in the group's name cut across the divisions of labour that sustain both the capitalist art market, and the disciplinic speciation and implicit class differentiations of the academy. The art worker idea echoed the free-and-easy working methods and role sharing of the amorphous Fluxus movement, a linchpin in the post-war global avant-garde.

Largely in response to this burst of organization, a government-funded alternative space movement unrolled in cities across the United States during the 1970s, especially in NYC, and many U.S. artists formed or joined groups. These alternative spaces for art exhibition and production were largely run by artists themselves. They put the horizontalist liberatory ideals of the AWC into practice. Over time, however, the survivors of state budget cutbacks among them adapted to normative institutional formations, boards of directors, managing directors, curators, etc., honouring their historic founding ideals as just that – history.

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As the AWC lurched into action in 1969, it changed shape and form several times. Still, the group's actual political life was quite short. Today I argue that the 'art worker' idea survives mainly as a figure, a ghost that haunts customary arrangements in the art world.

What does this ghost do? What is its aspect, or attributes? First, horizontality; it composes itself through open meetings. Second, analysis; it is committed to analysing the current conditions of oppression. Third, actions; the assembly takes them. It is a horizontally organized analysing action machine.

What does this spectre want? What is its uncompleted mission in life? Why does it always return? It wants money – that is, a more equitable relation between artist and marketplace, and compensation for artistic labour by institutions. It wants respect for artists' rights. It wants its body reconstituted – it wants all its parts to be included. And finally, it wants peace, not war.

The AWC was important as a moment – an extended occasion – of collective analysis. Its most well-known extant document is the 'Open Hearing,' an event of short speeches and acts arranged shortly after its convening, and published today online. AWC's analysis led directly and repeatedly to action of many different kinds. In addition to the street demonstrations in front of museums, the action fraction, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, staged numerous inventive and dramatic political performances. (Although its members insist on their absolute autonomy from AWC, they were very closely involved in the larger group.)

Many of the artists involved in the AWC, and certainly among the most influential given their highly developed analytic skills, were working in the vein of conceptual art. Joseph Kosuth, the leading NYC promoter of the genre of conceptual art, was active in AWC, as was Robert Morris, an artist who practiced in every mode of making. Morris made work that experimented directly with collective political forms and the economics of art. His cohort, the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, experimented with the sales economy of his work. Hans Haacke's art is based in systems analysis. Lucy Lippard wrote about the AWC, organized important exhibitions of conceptual art, and published the compendium of the form, *Six Years*.

A group of conceptual artists made up an influential cadre within a lesser-known successor organization to the AWC in New York, the mid-1970s Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC). Both inside and outside the larger AMCC, the New York section of the Art & Language group carried out systematic analysis and agitation around nearly all aspects of the art production system.

This imbrication of political organizing within a sphere of productive activity and a mode of art has decisively influenced subsequent practice in art. Most prominent is the method of 'institutional critique,' a kind of post-conceptual art that was firmly entrenched in the upper reaches of art academies in the 1990s. Today we may look at the various iterations of 'social practice,' for a continuation of the same kind of basic relation between political organizing – that is, doing politics – and artistic practice.

In saying that AWC was a critical analytic action machine, I mean that it represented a workers' inquiry in the most basic sense. But a close study of how that sense of analysis and action – very often now construed as artistic practice in and of itself – has moved forward over time, will reveal that a collective workers' inquiry has been largely co-opted and recuperated in the figure of the artist intellectual. This figure can have strong class affiliations that make him deaf to the whispers of the spirits.

Halloween costumes – it's only a sheet with holes...

The rise of the artist-critic-scholar within the ambit of western art institutions has been good for the institutions. They continually link with academics in other fields, spreading aesthetic activity into every reach of academic, institutional and governmental concern.

However, just as the AWC was propelled by artists and 'art workers' who were excluded from the art production and exhibition system as it was constituted in 1969 – primarily women and artists of color, on account of institutionalized sexism and racism – so too we may usefully look at (and to) those who are left out of today's academically consolidated system of politically inflected artistic discourses and practices.

Who is left out is everybody else. This includes artists whose practice lies within popular aesthetics, as well as many traditional painters and sculptors, people whose primary thought and feeling is expressed through the manipulation of physical materials. A large number of artists can't easily read; they are dyslexic, even dysgraphic. They are not anti-intellectual; they simply prefer not to do a lot of reading. One of these artists told me some years ago, 'Conceptual art isn't art!' She and her husband, a mural painter, were veterans of the little-regarded breakaway faction of the AWC, the service wing. (This is part of the political history of the AWC I recount in my book *Art Gangs*.)

Fuck 'em, some may say. Artists who make objects make plenty of money. Most don't. Lucky are they who can join the new proletariat in the studios of the high

earnings. There is still a huge gypsy camp outside the ivory tower, even if it has been repainted in black and red.

The ghost will show you where the money is hidden...

An important impetus of the AWC, and part of the activity of its committees was around the economic activity of artists. For example, an important final product of AWC committee work was the Artists Reserved Rights Sales Contract, produced years later by a group of artists and lawyers. This sales contract protected artists' financial interest in their work after it was first sold, so that a portion of subsequent sales would return to the artist. Original AWC member Hans Haacke may be alone among major artists who use this contract today.

Lucy Lippard once referred to the economic agenda of AWC as unfinished. This is the matter which has principally concerned artists in the last decade, and led to a number of initiatives which share characteristics with what is coming to be understood as a broader movement of sharing, commonsing, and a new wave of configurations of the cooperative economy. Prominent collective moves are being made by the Arts & Labor group of Occupy Wall Street and W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy).

Where is my union buried?

The AWC came into being on a platform of artists' rights. (New York State now has a law protecting the integrity of artists' works; you can't cut up a public sculpture or privately owned artwork into pieces without consequences.) More broadly, the question of artists' rights leads us to ask to what extent was the AWC a union?

When I was working with artists' groups in the 1970s and '80s, I heard the expression – 'Organizing artists is like herding cats.' They are so solitary, so individualistic, that they can't be organized. This aphorism implies that organizing is like herding. Artists should be persuaded to accept collective representation. Julia Bryan-Wilson in her book *Art Workers* writes that one notion of the AWC was as an artists' union, that is, a group that would negotiate with the employers, the museums and galleries, for better terms and conditions of labour.

It is an axiomatic slogan of the anarchist IWW (International Workers of the World, or Wobblies): 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.' In fact, in the art world, artists and members of the support structure

like curators, dealers, critics, and academics – the very people who the AWC included in the tag ‘art workers’ – have a lot in common. They are very often the same people, and are constantly commuting between roles in what is by no means a normal economic activity.

The AWC was *not* a union, but from time to time it would act like one. This first appeared when it merged with the broader Mobe (Mobilization Against the War) to engineer the Artists Strike against War, Racism and Repression, thereby actualizing the perennial radical unionists' dream of a general strike for political motives, at least among cultural producers. This example rolled forward, leading to the Day Without Art in the 1980s organized by AIDS activists, the Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, the Art Strike in the United Kingdom, and, finally, the creation of an actual union, the PASTA of the MoMA itself (Professional and Administrative Staff Association, with Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers). This was inspired by the AWC's initial years of actions against policies of the museum. (Roman Petruniak, a member of the Chicago curatorial collective inCUBATE, shows this in his masters thesis.) PASTA is now a branch of the Teamsters union in NYC.

That artists are capable of acting in solidarity was demonstrated again in the support manifested by the Arts & Labor group of Occupy Wall Street when they supported the 2011 strike of unionized art handlers at auction houses in NYC.

As mentioned above, the art worker has been recuperated from its '68-ish origins, as the conception has generated new sets of professional identities, and new modes of practice within institutions. Unsurprisingly, the horizontality of the AWC did not find an institutional form. Artistic knowledges and practices remain firmly contained within vertical arrangements of judgement and management. They are regulated, normalized and exploitable: they can be sold and funded.

The role or identification, not the job title – what I call the figure of the AWC – is imprisoned, a djinn in a bottle. Scrape away the containment, however, and the assembly in all its criticality and raucous democracy re-emerges with an almost frightening suddenness, as we saw recently with the new '68 of 2011.

A curious incident in Berlin...

The Berlin Biennale 7 art exposition in the spring of 2012 was directed by the artist-curator Artur Żmijewski and associates. (The artist-curator itself may be seen as an outcome of the process of horizontality, and the commutability of roles, within the profession of art worker begun by the figure of the AWC in its

time.) Źmijewski invited activists in the Spanish 15M and Occupy Wall Street movement to convene in one of the biennale spaces. The activists who took up this invitation were the more culturally engaged in those movements. They were given a space to, as it were, exhibit themselves and their political labour as a kind of performative work of art. Finally, after weeks of public discussion – and unrelenting mockery from art journalists – the activists of 15M and OWS were disposed to issue some advice on horizontality to art workers within the institutions wherein they found themselves confined.

Towards a zombie apocalypse for capitalism...

My favourite hallucination is to see the figure of the AWC haunting the occupied social centres, those reanimated edifices of speculative capital, and subtly invading the deliberative assemblies of the political collectives that produce them. It is hard work to open and maintain these volunteer public service agencies, and many pressing political agendas regularly present themselves to be met. But the so-called ‘monster institutions’ of the social centres have about them a magic air that comes from the ideal and the possibility of collective re-invention of everyday life. This life is constructed in its dimensions of subsistence, to be sure, freedom from oppression, and steady resistance to absurdist governance with its corruptions and authoritarianisms. It is reinvention as well of the participating subject herself, who, through participation in collective work at a disobedient self-organized space, comes to understand herself as an empowered social agent, a person who can truly create her own world from the rubbish heap of neo-liberal impoverishments.

Here I return to the subject of the excluded, those who are excluded from the new spirit of art workers as it lives on in its institutionalized forms. And that is just everybody else, the masses, the multitude, and the perennial hope of all social movements.

These past few years I have been studying the disobedient culture of the occupied social centres (OSCs). None of these models – not the labour union, nor the institutionalized artist critic, and not the entrepreneurial model of art worker, include the disobedient artist. Political squatting and the occupied social centres and collective houses that it produces, is not part of the larger frame of art discourse. Of course squatting is against the law. (Actually, it is more beside the law, but that is an argument for another day.) Illegality endows the experiment with the frisson of adventure. It also underlines that anything happening here is outside the bounds of normal regulated life.

What OSCs offer – and certainly it is a promise that is not regularly fulfilled – is an opportunity for anyone to experiment with their life together with others. This is readily embraced within the context of disobedient subculture, the descendant strains of hippiedom – you can ‘punk out’ or ‘drop out’ of society together with us, your new family. But the ways in which anyone can be experimental and creative with their life, irrespective of cultural and social containments and boundaries, are less often understood or practiced.

The OSCs are arenas in which to practice a right to creativity. You have the right to try something different with your productive energies and your social instincts. You have the right to put into practice your wild schemes, to see how they might work out, and if they might be useful for others. A realm of unfettered and absolute freedom, a forest of Avalon or Sherwood outside of the endless city, is only ever imaginable. That is what OSCs struggle to practice. In the terms of Franco Berardi, they seek to interrupt the subjective automatisms that sustain capitalism. That is why so many resist what might more normally be understood as success – legalization as cultural centers under the normal terms of whatever governmental entity might have jurisdiction. For then they become simply replacement provisions, not free and open centres of creative experiment.

One of the better explanations of what has been going on was given 50 years ago by Alexander Trocchi in a proposal that had its own practical consequences during the 1960s as people strived to build an oppositional cultural configuration that could overtake the old one. Writing as a Situationist, Trocchi observes that people have ‘forgotten how to play,’ settling for entertainment, art that ‘anesthetizes the living,’ and from which ‘active participation is almost non-existent.’

Trocchi's dream of a ‘spontaneous university’ as ‘detonator of the invisible insurrection’ has, in effect, already arisen. His 1963 essay on techniques for a ‘coup du monde’ – a text better known as ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’ – envisions a revolution already underway, which is in a continuous process of definition. It is a cultural revolt that aims to seize ‘the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind,’ creating ‘the passionate substructure of a new order of things.’ The revolutionary change will then come up on the mass of people ‘like the changing season.’

Trocchi laid out a plan for a town – citing Guy Debord's notions of unitary urbanism (crucially influenced by the more radical Constant) – because ‘integral art cannot be accomplished except on the level of urbanism.’ Trocchi's plan for a network of free universities, further elaborated in his ‘Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint,’ inspired the UK art centre movement of the 1960s and '70s. Despite

its reliance on commerce in culture – (more influential as a blueprint for the Beatles' Apple Corp) – and a Saint-Simonian faith in a creative elite, the Sigma tactics mirrored the blossoming of communes, intentional communities during the countercultural golden age.

The Sigma plan may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the political projects of occupation that began in the 1970s as self-organized occupied social centres. While the revolutionary cultural ideology that underlay Trocchi's appeals has faded after decades under the capitalist sun, appropriationist place-making has become a central strategy of a politicized subculture. As increasing precarization and gentrification draws together previously separated class fragments, the art worker in these centres has been joined by any worker, that is, anyone interested in skill-sharing, building networks of social solidarity, or just hanging out.

But have they been joined or supplanted? The challenge facing the politicized operators of the occupied social centres and the art workers of today is to realize their common interests and necessities in the hyper-regulated anti-creative realms of the security states, and together to do art work in those free spaces that remain, and those that will be opened.

Coda: A reviewer calls for a closer connection in this text between the life of the AWC at the turn of the decade of the 1960s into '70s and the political occupations of social centres that began in Italy in the later 1970s as an extension of the Autonomia, or extra-parliamentary left, and developed through the '80s, '90s, '00s, and continues strong as a main trope of political squatting to the present day. That link may be found now in Macao in Milan, where an assembly of cultural workers that took a high-rise building continues strong in another occupation in the urban periphery of the city. Macao is linked with Teatro Valle, an antique Roman theatre occupied by its workers. Both are networked with numerous other similar initiatives across Italy. Stay tuned to your Radio Alice for further news...

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