

# REVOLUTIONARY PROTESTERS IN THE GARDEN of the Museum of Modern Art

NOTES FROM THE WAR ZONE by Lanier Graham

1969 was a bloody year at MoMA. It did not start out that way, but that's how it ended up. At the beginning of the year a group called the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) was formed around the actions of an artist named Takis who did not like the way MoMA was treating one of his works. A mere artist has rights in such a situation? What a radical idea! Many New York artists started gathering around this idea and related ideas. They were protesting how out of touch MoMA and all other art museums were with contemporary society, especially the poor, people of color, and women. The AWC also was protesting the war in Vietnam. They were demanding major institutional changes. MoMA's director, Bates Lowry, along with all the trustees, were shocked by the forcefulness of the demands. At first he did not even want to meet with them, but was advised to do so.

Lowry arranged for a gathering in the MoMA garden with protestors and members of the MoMA staff to discuss the issues on March 30<sup>th</sup>.

Arthur Drexler, for whom I was working as his Associate Curator, asked me to be there as the representative of his Department. He said: "You have a degree in diplomacy – use it!"

The atmosphere that day was filled with some rays of hope enveloped by clouds of anxiety. After all, this gathering was a step forward – actual face-to-face discussions. But Gov. Rockefeller was afraid there might be violence. And there was great art to be protected from possible insanity in the museum that his mother had founded. Unbeknownst to the protestors, he had surrounded the garden with a battalion of riot police, just in case.

The gathering was peaceful and fruitful. There was no violence. Among the leading figures with whom I spoke were Carl Andre, and Lucy Lippard. I was only one of several MoMA curators there that day. Happily, one of us curators was black – Kynaston McShine. My conversations proved to be typical of that day's dialogue. Carl wanted to change the whole world. I listened as long as I could. But I was more interested in actual conversation. I spotted Lucy. We had read each other's work. She was more level-headed. The AWC demands for greater diversity on the Board, on the staff, and in the collection & exhibition programs seemed quite reasonable to me and I told them so. There was in fact very little diversity in any of these areas (not only at MoMA but at most American art museums).

Somewhere that year I also had a meaningful conversation with Angela Davis, either at MoMA, or the Studio Museum, or perhaps at the conference of "Neighborhood Museums." Angela argued with passionate lucidity that our White Male Upper Class museum was keeping poor people from tasting any of their cultural heritage as Americans because they could not afford to come inside MoMA or the Met. Moreover, we curators were denying people of color an important part of their actual identity, because there was little inside the museums they could relate to and be proud of as people of color. There was no modern Black Art in modern museums. There was no African Art in any major art museum. Nothing!

I also said to Angela and to Lucy that I did NOT agree that MoMA should sell half its collection to support anti-Vietnam programs, or that the rest of the collection be distributed to dozens of museums from coast to coast, and that admission should always be free. But I did agree it was a good idea for MoMA to have outreach programs, and at least one Free Day a month. Some of these demands, when softened into requests, actually came to pass, after they were calmly presented to the Board. A Free Day eventually was instituted, diversity increased dramatically, and the recently opened, MoMA-supported Studio Museum in Harlem became an even more vibrant institution. Moreover, Neighborhood museums started to be seen.

Art Workers kept up the pressure with clever, non-violent tactics. As I recall, May 3rd was "Penny Day." A group of Art Workers lined up and paid their MoMA admission fee one penny at a time. That holdup lasted a very long time. Something had to be done, but

what? Lowry did not handle the situation well and was asked to resign in early May.

Meanwhile, the AWC called a Public Meeting on April 10<sup>th</sup>. It was led by major figures such as Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Lucy Lippard, and Sol LeWitt, with the support of none other than Barnett Newman. This was not about art. This was about changing the world and about 300 artists forming a kind of community. The AWC was rapidly gaining membership and steam.

Arthur Drexler, head of MoMA's Department of Architecture & Design (and a candidate for the vacant directorship) was put in charge of what was called the Ad Hoc Planning Committee. In effect, he was Acting Director. Drexler was sympathetic to the AWC.

He looked for ways to generate fruitful discussions. He and his associates formed several advisory groups to help get a grip on these unprecedented developments.

Progress was very slow in the eyes of Art Workers, and many protesters were less level-headed than Angela and Lucy. To move things along, some decided blood needed to be shed. On November 18<sup>th</sup>, members of the Guerilla Art Action Group (with the support of the AWC) entered the lobby of MoMA. Hidden under their clothing were two gallons of beef blood. After distributing their leaflets, they suddenly broke into a performance piece shouting at each other and ripping off each other's clothes. As the blood bags burst, they fell to the floor moaning as if mortally wounded. Then they got up and left.

On September 20<sup>th</sup> there was an historic meeting between Drexler and AWC leadership in the Trustees Room. A decision was taken that the AWC would publish an anti-war poster and MoMA would help to fund it and distribute it. The image was a horrific photograph of the My Lai Massacre of March 1968, a massacre that had just been uncovered and released to the press. LIFE and TIME would run the story in December with the horrific photograph. This photograph showed the bodies of women and babies murdered and mutilated by U.S. forces who had gone berserk in Vietnam. The bloody scene had been photographed by Sgt. Ronald Haeberle. The words on the poster (printed in the color of dark red blood) read: "Q. And babies? A. And babies."

It was a remarkable position for Drexler to take. He was very much against the war, and felt museums should not be silent on the issue.

And he was not alone. The MoMA staff and the staff of other New York Museums acted to close their museums on October 15<sup>th</sup> as a protest against the war. Nothing like that had ever happened before. On the other hand, Drexler wanted to be the next director of MoMA whose trustees were largely Republican millionaires who supported Nixon and the War. He also had one strike against his candidacy because he was quietly gay. He called me into his office one day and asked my opinion. I said: "It would be good to publish this poster. It would help stop the War. However, it will not help your chances of being MoMA's next director. You will have to chose." Arthur decided, after some uncertainty, to do the right thing. But when he presented the poster idea to the Board, Rockefeller and William Paley (of CBS) hit the roof. MoMA's support for the project went down the drain, and so did any chance that Arthur would be the next director. He had spilled his blood in the War against War.

#### POSTSCRIPT (1971)

The AWC went ahead and printed an edition of 50,000 on Dec. 26, 1969 and gave it wide distribution around the world. One poster actually did end up inside MoMA in a 1970 exhibition called "Information," a show curated by Kynaston McShine. The AWC eventually fragmented. It had run out of steam by 1971. But it had accomplished important things. Diversity became a new ideal in the Museum World, coast to coast. Free Days became standard in American museums, coast to coast. They even got many New York museums to close of October 15, 1969 in support of ending the War. These were amazing political accomplishments – truly historic.

Moreover, the equally radical idea of museum workers belonging to a union took hold. MoMA workers led the way with the creation of an actual union called PASTA (Professional & Administrative Staff Association). It was organized in part by Stuart Edelson, my former assistant. I encouraged Stuart. After all, wages at MoMA were below poor. People did not work at MoMA for money. During most of my years at MoMA, my income was below the poverty line. Lucy Lippard had worked in the MoMA library. She and I shared the joys of earning \$45 a week. My assistants could barely eat.

But that was not my fight. I had done what I could. I had proposed MoMA's first exhibition of revolutionary posters ("PARIS: MAY 1968") after being in Paris at that time and collecting the powerful posters. And I had proposed to Drexler an even more radical show

of American revolutionary posters in the summer of 1969 – an idea that he took even farther with his super-radical publishing idea. My efforts were small, but I hoped they were moving an Old Grey institution closer to the Light.

As I look back, I think most useful work in the War Zone was helping to negotiate the demands of the AWC into rational proposals the MoMA Board could actually consider during the months that I had remaining on the MoMA staff.

I had already accepted a new position in San Francisco during the summer of 1969. I was to be the Chief Curator of the city's combining art museums – the de Young Museum & the Legion of Honor Museum. By the late fall of 1969, when the blood was starting to spill, I was half-packed. As soon as my Guimard exhibition opened in March of 1970, I would be headed to California. Out there would be other battles that needed to be fought in the ongoing campaign to make art museums relevant in the modern world.

FLG, Fall 1969

(Revised 1971) For a short history of the AWC, see Lucy Lippard, "Art Workers' Coalition," *STUDIO INTERNATIONAL*, November 1970.