From the Gallery to the Streets: Dissenting Art and the Vietnam War

by

Rhiannon Corby
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments..................................................................................................................3

List of images..........................................................................................................................4

Allen Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra”..............................................................................5

Introduction...............................................................................................................................6

1. The Modernist Tradition, Art Institutions, and the Purist Press......................15

2. Public Presence, Democratization, and the Power of the Image.................44

3. The Poster: Identity and Consumerism in the New Left................................79

Epilogue..................................................................................................................................108

Works Cited..............................................................................................................................126
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LIST OF IMAGES

Figure 1: “Blood Bath” ................................................................. 15
Figure 2: My Lai Protest at MoMA ........................................... 17
Figure 3: Shapolsky et al .......................................................... 30
Figure 4: Artists’ Tower for Peace ............................................. 36
Figure 5: Q. And Babies? A. And Babies ................................. 40
Figure 6: Visitor’s Poll ............................................................... 45
Figure 7: U.S.A. Flag ................................................................. 60
Figure 8: Radich Gallery Flag Show .......................................... 64
Figure 9: Napalm Flag ............................................................... 72
Figure 10: Female Bomb .......................................................... 73
Figure 11: The Portable War Memorial ...................................... 73
Figure 12: Moratorium ............................................................. 74
Figure 13: Saigon ................................................................. 75
Figure 14: Advertisement for Job cigarettes .............................. 83
Figure 15: McCarthy. Peace .................................................. 89
Figure 16: Vietnam ................................................................. 90
Figure 17: Dylan ................................................................. 92
Figure 18: I Want Out ............................................................ 95
Figure 19: Bringing the War Home .......................................... 109
Figure 20: Bringing the War Home, 2004 ............................... 111
Figure 21: iRaq ................................................................. 120
Excerpt from “Wichita Vortex Sutra”

By Allen Ginsberg

Napalm and black clouds emerging in newsprint
Flesh soft as a Kansas girl’s
ripped open by metal explosion—
three five zero zero on the other side of the planet
cought in barbed wire, fire ball
bullet shock, bayonet electricity
bomb blast terrific in skull & belly, shrapneled throbbing meat

While this American nation argues war:
conflicting language, language
proliferating in airwaves
filling the farmhouse ear, filling
the City Manager’s head in his oaken office
the professor’s head in his bed at midnight
the pupil’s head at the movies
blond haired, his heart throbbing with desire
for the girlish image bodied on the screen:
or smoking cigarettes
and watching Captain Kangaroo
that fabled damned of nations
prophecy come true—

Though the highway’s straight,
dipping downward through low hills,
rising narrow on the far horizon
black cows browse in caked fields
ponds in the hollows lie frozen,
quietness.

Is this the land that started war on China?
This be the soil that thought Cold War for decades?
Are these nervous naked trees & farmhouses
the vortex
of oriental anxiety molecules
that’ve imagined American Foreign Policy
and magick’d up paranoia in Peking
and curtains of living blood
surrounding far Saigon?

February 14, 1966
Introduction

Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra” is an intensely emotive snapshot of the urgent and insurmountable tension that gripped American society during the Vietnam War. Written in 1966 during the rise of antiwar protests responding to early stages of escalation in Vietnam, the poem expresses the widespread confusion and incomprehension of war policy in American society—the conflicting language of the war, America’s language, follows various citizens about their everyday lives. Additionally, Ginsberg’s work shows the uneasiness many Americans felt about identifying with a nation that grew increasingly entrenched in a bloody, seemingly endless struggle with questionable objectives. What is most striking about Ginsberg’s poem, however, is the anger that seeps from Ginsberg’s description of Vietnam War atrocities. This sentiment is in keeping with the desperation and indignation that would ignite and propel the growing Vietnam antiwar movement. This movement, spearheaded by a core of passionate students and activists, and gaining support from an ever-widening array of sources, would soon become one of the strongest pressures on the American government to terminate the Vietnam War.

In addition to typifying the attitudes and sentiments of the antiwar movement, “Wichita Vortex Sutra” evidences the vital role the arts played in the ongoing struggle to deal with cultural uproar and lack of governmental accountability. The visual arts engaged in this struggle with keen intensity, painting protest of the Vietnam War into artwork and creating political art coalitions to organize larger scale
protest events. Despite these efforts, many artists became discouraged with the failure of their art in visibly combating American foreign policy. In April of 1968, conceptual artist Hans Haacke gave up on art’s power in politics. Utterly discouraged by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., he wrote:

The event pressed something into focus that I have known for long but never realized so bitterly and helplessly, namely, that what we are doing, the production and the talk about sculpture, has no relation to the urgent problems of our society. [...] Art is utterly unsuited as a political tool.\(^1\)

Although Haacke would soon revise his view by exhibiting several political installations discussed later in this work, the attitude he expressed in this letter has in large part prevailed in scholarship of the political art of the 1960s. Important works have neglected investigation of this artistic period on two points. First, they fail to give it a meaningful place in the art historical narrative of the 20\(^{th}\) century, suggesting that political art against the Vietnam War was nothing more than a speedbump within the prevailing modernist canon. Second, those few scholars who have addressed political art in depth, most notably Francis Frascina in his work *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America*,\(^2\) entirely ignore the medium of graphic art, a critically important art movement that occurred at the same time, used comparable techniques in affecting political change, and held many of the same goals as painting and gallery based art. Major scholarship on graphic art of the time, for example the work of David Kunzle and Mildred Friedman’s piece in *Graphic Design*

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in America, has treated fine art with a similar indifference, mentioning it as a distant source of inspiration for the poster artist.\(^3\) Counter to the narrative the aforementioned works provide, this thesis contends that political art did succeed in contributing to the antiwar movement in tangible ways, and that it did so in conjunction with the simultaneous renaissance of poster art that arose from the grass-roots organizing of the New Left.

Prevailing modernist thought that emerged in the years following World War II held that the best art was that which eschewed political involvement entirely. Although the political engagement exhibited by numerous artists during the Vietnam War challenged this doctrine and lessened its hold over critical thought in the arts, its vestiges persist to this day, leaving the politicized fine art of the 1960s and 1970s an often overlooked subject in most prominent survey works. The book Twentieth-Century American Art is part of an acclaimed art history series released by Oxford University Press.\(^4\) Despite the work’s extensive analysis of modernism, Abstract Expressionism, New Deal art, Pop art, feminist art, and contemporary art, political art of the 1960s is almost entirely overlooked, receiving attention only in a short five-page section in the chapter on Minimalism and Conceptual art. Author Erika Doss seems reluctant to endow political art with its deserved significance as a precursor to feminist art, or to acknowledge the significant steps it took in dismantling the stigmatization of art as political protest.

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Scholar Thomas Crow covers the myriad new forms of art that arose during this period in his work *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*. However, the title of his work promises more than he delivers. Like Doss, he steers away from discussion of art against the Vietnam War. While Crow does provide a somewhat comprehensive list of landmark works and actions in the political art movement, he neglects several key demonstrations, most importantly the 1966 Artists’ Tower for Peace. This landmark, both literally and historically, was one of the first and most important antiwar gestures to emerge from the art world, but, as Frascina comments, Crow’s work is the latest of a long list of scholarship to ignore the Peace Tower’s significance in the antiwar art movement. Frascina points out that Crow “ignores the Tower and other compatible events, artists and works that do not conform to the assumptions and methodologies of a minimally revised modernist canon.”

William C. Seitz’s *Art in the Age of Aquarius, 1955-1970* falls into the same trap as many of the art critics who reviewed political shows or actions during the sixties and early seventies. While Seitz dignifies political art with a chapter, he concentrates on the aesthetic inadequacies of political art rather than its effect. Seitz describes political works as having “little aesthetic value” and being “propaganda statements and inferior in quality.” Seitz’s attitude can be described in the words of David Kunzle, who explains one plight of the political artist: “His fury is dismissed as a tantrum, or clowning; his outrage is the caprice of children who are permitted

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anything, as long as the parents remain in ultimate control.” While Seitz acknowledges that on occasion “the allegedly aesthetic can, with a jolt, become controversially political,” his tone throughout the chapter suggests that while political art constitutes a viable thread of art in the 1960s, this trend was largely uppity and presumptuous, and its impact as a whole was negligible.

Frascina’s work is by far the most detailed, all-inclusive account of the politicization of art during the Vietnam War. However, *Art, Politics, and Dissent* stays relatively focused on the world of fine art, and little mention is made of the parallel poster phenomenon developing within the New Left student movement. Bradford D. Martin’s work *The Theater is in the Street* and Julia Bryan-Wilson’s scholarship *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* are also important works in the study of politicized art of this period, but they too neglect to bring poster art into their discussions. While all three of these works mention the poster movement to the extent that it occasionally influenced fine artists, their analyses focus heavily on political art within the elitist fine art culture that prevailed throughout this period. Graphic art compilations exhibit a similar tendency to focus exclusively on the poster medium without a comparison with the simultaneous politicization of the fine arts.

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This partition between the two mediums creates what artist and scholar Lucy Lippard has labeled a class division.\textsuperscript{10} The exclusive world of high art was primarily occupied by the most privileged individuals of America society. Museum owners and art collectors had to be extremely wealthy to enter into the market as connoisseurs and collectors. The high price of museum entry fees, which constituted one target of political art groups of the 1960s, made the demographic usually attending these institutions a prosperous one. Poster art, on the other hand, became the new hip expression of counterculture and activist youth. The face of the antiwar movement on a popular level, these low-cost posters appealed to a wide range of young people with little or no money to spend on art and little interest in museums. These class divides didn’t stop the graphic design and the fine arts from intermingling with each other, as the third chapter demonstrates. However, scholars’ reluctance to set these two phenomena alongside each other has left a distinctive gap in understanding art’s role in the antiwar movement. Scholarship’s devaluation of political activity in the fine art world and its segregation of the political movements in graphic design and museum art constitute the starting point for this thesis.

This work has three broad aims. The first is to demonstrate and explain art institutions’ profound reticence on political matters and their consistent lack of support for artists seeking to experiment with the burgeoning practice of political art during the Vietnam War. Chapter 1 exhibits modernism’s hold on institutions of fine art, which encouraged artistic purity and distance from social and political concerns. This chapter argues that the modernist doctrine resulted in a lack of support for the

\textsuperscript{10} Lucy R. Lippard, \textit{A Different War: Vietnam in Art} (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1990), 27.
political art movement that made it difficult for those involved in the movement to utilize the tried and usual methods for gaining recognition and a widespread audience. While it posed many challenges for artists, the lack of support from museums and art critics also forced artists to come up with new methods of distribution and self-promotion that resulted in a wider and more diverse audience base than institutional support traditionally offered.

The second goal of this thesis is to outline the most effective strategies put to use by fine artists in the absence of institutional backing. Use of public space and performance-style protest gave artist protesters a novelty and crowd appeal that drew in passersby, often inviting them to join these protests themselves. Additionally, artists were able to turn the rich visual landscape of consumer culture into a political tool, by appropriating powerful images such as the American flag and putting them to use as a form of dissent. Similarly, artists like Peter Saul created works that fed the post-war need for vibrant, immediate, flamboyant imagery, but put these visual strategies to use for the antiwar cause. Chapter 2 argues that artists effectively used consumer culture’s image overflow, along with performance-based art that mobilized neighborhoods and cities, to create a body of work that successfully challenged American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Finally, this thesis seeks to place the resurrection of the political poster that occurred in 1960s leftist groups within the overall narrative of protest art. The poster movement was essential to the development of the New Left as a social group with a strong identity, and provided an appealing alternative to upscale works of art that, although often effective statements against the war, were out of reach financially and
culturally to students and activists who were actually spearheading the protest movement. By employing the techniques of commercial advertising that had constituted a main use of the poster form for decades and creating a body of visually captivating political art, the poster boom was an invaluable asset to the antiwar movement.

Although this work shows the ways in which political art of the Vietnam War Era swayed political conviction, a certain degree of proportion is necessary. One of the potential pitfalls when discussing political art is an over-glorification of its effect on its creators and its audience. The political power of art is qualified and limited. One piece of art has rarely changed the outcome of an election, or, for that matter a war, and indeed, many artists echoed Haack’s sentiment of utter disenchantment with art as a political tool. That said, this work shows that the political power art wields is in its potential to persuade and confront dominant viewpoints both intellectually and emotionally.

Out of this caveat comes another. Given that art affects political principles on an intellectual and emotional level and does not necessarily, at least at first, result in political action on the part of the viewer, how is it possible to measure the success of protest art? While there is no way to quantify the amount of political clout artistic works and actions wielded, it is evident from extensive newspaper and journal articles, letters-to-the-editor, viewers’ responses, statistics detailing audience numbers, and a variety of other sources that these works went far from unnoticed. It is impossible to link a single changed vote or burned draft card to a work of art. However, judging from responses in the press and audience statements, political
artists and graphic designers had a strong effect on people who interacted with them and their works. In light of these findings, protest art of this era is a testament to the potential political influence art holds. It suggests that art can indeed be a potent mode of dissent that is capable of swaying public opinion toward its cause. This power of political art was put to the test in the sixties climate of constant social upheaval and unrest. It succeeded by spreading the antiwar message to new audiences, creating a visual manifestation of the protest movement that strengthened this group’s identity, and by proving to subsequent political movements that socially engaged art was indeed a meaningful and compelling means of voicing marginalized opinions.
Chapter 1
The Modernist Tradition, Art Institutions, and the Purist Press

On November 18, 1969 two men and two women marched into the Museum of Modern Art in New York. After stationing themselves in the entry hall and dropping a pile of their written demands amongst onlookers, they began to tear at each others’ clothing, bursting sacs of cow blood onto the museum floor and yelling “rape!” as they collapsed onto the ground, moaning. When they stood, their audience applauded them as if they had just presented a piece of theater. Before leaving, the protesters addressed their audience, imploring their audience to “help us clean up this mess.”11 This action became known as “Blood Bath” (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The Guerrilla Art Action Group performing “Blood Bath” in the MoMA lobby. 1969.

That same month, these members of the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) delivered a written statement to MoMA demanding that all members of the conservative Rockefeller family remove themselves from the board of trustees because they invested in companies that enabled continued military efforts in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{12} These demands, entitled “A Call for the Immediate Resignation of all the Rockefellers From the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art” made a series of provocative assertions about the institution. GAAG wrote that the trustees “use art as a disguise, a cover for their brutal involvement in all spheres of the war machine…[they] sterilize art of any form of social protest and indictment of the oppressive forces in society, and therefore render art totally irrelevant to the existing social crisis.”\textsuperscript{13} GAAG, which was a branch of a larger political group called the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), organized multiple protests of a similar sort in following months. In January of 1970, the AWC and GAAG both demonstrated at MoMA against the My Lai Massacre. Members placed four wreaths beneath Picasso’s Guernica, distributing copies of a protest poster created by the AWC. Artist Joyce Kozloff, carrying her infant, sat in front of the wreaths, while a minister read a memorial service for the dead children (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Francis Frascina, Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 111.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 185.
In addition to putting forth a blunt statement against the war, these protests show the members of GAAG and the AWC reacting against a particular set of established traditions in the art world. These included the artistic traditions that placed high art in elite spheres, that dictated a distance between artistic endeavors and social and political problems, and that resulted in the immensely critical response to political art when it became prominent in the mid-1960s. The art institutions that perpetuated and encouraged these traditions became a major target of GAAG and other dissenting artists. The irony of the struggle political artists took up however was that the institutions which were the source of so much discontent in the realm of political art were in many ways necessary to the structure and function of the art world as a whole. With few exceptions, political art within the institutions of the art museum and art criticism was largely unheard. However, by placing themselves in
opposition to these institutions and traditions, and thereby cutting off many of the established ways of reaching wide audiences, artists were forced to explore new modes of artistic protest that spread political art to audiences outside the establishment they were critiquing.

Since the 1930s, political art had fallen out of fashion. Government funding for artists through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program had encouraged artists to engage politically and socially in their work with the aim of promoting national unity and restoring confidence in democracy and capitalism after the Great Depression.15 The Social Realist art of the 1930s was a period when “the human subject took precedence and many artists aimed to create a widely accessible public culture based on everyday life.”16

The swell in political art of the 1930s dwindled along with government funding. However, this period did produce some of the most influential young artists who would become the champions of Abstract Expressionism. After the immense cultural change provoked by the demise of the New Deal and by World War II, artists like Jackson Pollock and Adolph Gottlieb aggressively put their work of the 1930s behind them, expressing a need to “destroy…the concept of what constituted a good painting at that time” as Gottlieb said in a 1963 interview.17 Politically engaged art fell out of fashion, replaced by a general adherence to a modernist doctrine of “pure art” in which the medium and form of the art was thought to be sufficient to bestow the work with significance. Social or political reference within the artwork did not

16 Ibid., 101-102.
add to the power of the piece, but rather detracted from it. This tradition persisted throughout the 1940s and 1950s with few exceptions, welcoming the rise of Abstract Expressionism, Minimal art, Conceptual art, and Pop art, among others.

The silence of political art in the years following World War II can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the conformity to post-war patriotism and American exceptionalism tied in greatly with the predominance of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Although Abstract Expressionist work was eruptive and powerful, it was distanced from the everyday world. This shielded it from the communist paranoia of the Cold War, and Abstract Expressionism became the poster child for American creativity and freedom. As Max Kozloff writes in his formative essay “American Painting During the Cold War”:

If this country was unrivaled in industrial capacity and military might, it must follow that we had a culture of our own, too. One ought not, therefore, be surprised to see the fading away during the late '50s of the official conviction that modern art, however incomprehensible, was subversive.¹⁸

As the United States attained a new position of power in the world after World War II, Abstract Expressionism became the artistic corollary of American prominence, and was regarded as such in the United States and Europe alike. Work by Abstract Expressionists was sent abroad by official agencies as evidence of America's creative notoriety.¹⁹ As historian and art critic Serge Guilbaut has demonstrated, Abstract

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¹⁹ Ibid., 8.
Expressionism’s formal rebellion left it open to usage in Cold War propaganda that attempted to represent the “freedom” of the artist under American capitalism.\(^{20}\)

Abstract Expressionists generally aligned themselves with leftist politics. Although they sometimes gave their abstract works political titles, such as Robert Motherwell’s series of paintings *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1948-1970s) that lamented the Spanish Civil War, Abstract Expressionists tended to express their liberal politics through sponsorship of leftist journals, such as the socialist publication *Dissent*.\(^{21}\) Lack of explicit political conviction left their works open to appropriation for ends that often clashed with the painters’ political agenda: to negate the conformity, materialism, and automation of the 1950s.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, Abstract Expressionists shared “a keen sense of the failings of U.S. society, which was related to the bleak political terrain of the McCarthy years.”\(^{23}\) But it seems that McCarthy kept the upper hand in this battle. Abstract Expressionists’ political message was subtle at best, and it would be this genre’s distance from political matters that would set the standard for other forms of art. While in some ways the appearance of Abstract Expressionism opened the door for younger artists who pioneered new trends in the art world, the stress upon formal boundaries was strictly emphasized. As art critic Clement Greenberg wrote in his 1960 essay “Modernist Painting,” “the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique


\(^{22}\) Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater is in the Streets* (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 127.

to the nature of its medium." This attitude allowed Pop art to become a fad, but prevented the overt blending of politics and art that would become more and more common over the course of the 1960s.

Although during the late 1950s explicit references to politics in art were still rare, several other trends in art culture reveal progress towards politically engaged art. The first is an increased focus on American culture. In 1955, photographer Robert Frank set off on a road trip of the United States, documenting his travels in approximately 27,000 photographs. In his essay on Robert Frank’s photography and Cold War visual culture, Neil Campbell writes that Frank’s voyage “had a specific methodological approach that brought him close to his subjects and their landscapes as he both observed and recorded their diverse lives.” Frank titled the resulting collection of photographs *The Americans*. Released in the United States in 1959, the work struck audiences with its dark, nihilistic view of American culture, conveyed through a style that was “raw, unfinished, and incoherent.” Frank’s compilation was emulative of a larger interest in exploring and capturing the nature of American culture, which served as a prelude to the scrutiny artists would turn towards 1950s banality in the following decade.

Pop art, which revolved around the consumerism and mass markets of the post-war era, is often interpreted as an early step towards political art. Its ambiguous stance as both a critique of consumer culture and a promoter of it left it open to...

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interpretations from all sides, but many, like Edward Kienholz, “suffered no hesitation in pronouncing Warhol’s simulation of mass production and distribution an act of ‘social protest,’ and that perception gains credence in the light of the artists’ work over the next few years.”  

Artists’ use of American icons such as the flag, pop icons, and consumer products became more and more prevalent over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. Led by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and James Rosenquist, this trend shows a heightened critique of American society that the art of social protest would later adopt.

In 1959, Nancy Spero and her husband Leon Golub, both prominent artists whose work would take a radically political turn over the course of the Vietnam War, moved to Paris to escape the “stranglehold” Abstract Expressionism held in New York: “I didn’t want to do important art, the kind of art that a lot of the Abstract Expressionists were doing” said Spero in a 2004 interview. “I felt that abstraction—Abstract Expressionism primarily, and Minimalism—had nothing to do with war. It was like a cover-up for what was really going on.”  

This statement brings together multiple sentiments that characterized the political art of the 1960s and 70s: a need to oppose the increasingly futile conflict in Vietnam, a growing frustration with the narrow concept of “valid” art, and the belief that major art institutions like MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Guggenheim Museum were both supporting the war and simultaneously stripping artists of their political power by undercutting political artists’ attempts to get their message out.

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Nancy Spero’s response in the 2004 interview outlines the basic ideas against which political artists were taking arms. However, it also shows the extent to which these different fights—against the Vietnam War, against art institutions, and against rigid expectations of art—were intimately engaged with each other. She strongly associates the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in art institutions with the perpetuation of the war effort, in a way that was common in the radical efforts of political artists in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Guerrilla Art Action Group denounced the war as well as the institutions that supported it, while the AWC brought attention to the homogenous and exclusive policies of MoMA and comparable institutions. Together, these issues created a small but strong community of artists trying to make a political dent when “there was no institutional support for protest or for the use and display of visual culture in a critical and politicized way.”

Although the influence of antiwar art is thought by many to have been negligible because of the lack of institutional backing, the blending of these causes widened the circle of political artists considerably, bringing in a variety of resources that allowed artists to address their political dissatisfaction through other methods.

The rise of political art was gradual. Although *Anger* by Wally Hedrick appeared in 1959, a work scholar Thomas Crow calls “the first artistic denunciation of American policy in Vietnam” the trend didn’t catch on until the mid-1960s. As rising awareness of the American presence in Vietnam seeped into everyday life, and the turmoil of the 1960s reached breaking point, artists began to question the import

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of their work. The tumult of countrywide social movements was all over newspapers, and made many artists feel their work had lost its relevance in a time of such nationwide tension. As political issues became more and more pressing, artists asked themselves what sort of political leverage might fall within their purview. To most, it did not seem that their art could be a valid political weapon. However, some artists saw this widespread cultural transition as an opportunity. The rise of the New Left, feminism, Civil Rights, Gay Rights, and other social movements started artists and critics wondering how art would play into these new politics. To some artists and art critics it seemed that the period had revolutionized art making, bringing about an entirely new conception of art’s power and “forcing us to a completely new set of ideas about what an artist was and what an artist did.”

While using art as a political tool appealed to many artists, they often differed in opinion on the best way to exercise this power. Some, like Sol LeWitt, believed that while political activism was acceptable outside the studio, artworks should remain untouched by social commentary. A nonobjective sculpture and leading antiwar activist, LeWitt concluded in 1968 that “the artist wonders what he can do when he sees the world going to pieces around him. But as an artist he can do nothing except to be an artist.” Abe Ajay, one of the most concerned artists to sign the 1965 full-page ad in the New York Times telling artists to “End Your Silence” believed that “an artist’s work should be clean as a hound’s tooth of politics and social protest

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imagery. It is always bad art, sad and dreary and witless...Good art is never social work. There is no message in the medium.”

Some artists, like Sol LeWitt, Robert Huot, and Carle Andre, chose to keep their pieces free of social and political engagement while auctioning off some of their best work to support antiwar organizations. They claimed that since their art maintained a degree of formal integrity, it proved a stronger asset to the antiwar cause than less valuable art engaging directly with adversary politics. “The artists and the individual pieces were selected to represent a particular aesthetic attitude,” stated a brochure for a 1968 show benefiting the Student Mobilization committee to End the War in Vietnam, “in the conviction that a cohesive group of important works makes the most forceful statement for peace.”

Other artists, among them Nancy Spero, Leon Golub, Martha Rosler, Peter Saul, and Edward Kienholz, filled their work with references to the chaos the war caused, both in Vietnam and domestically. Regardless of the way in which artists chose to exercise dissent, the politics of the war constituted one of the primary sources of their dissatisfaction, and one of the chief targets of their work.

In a parallel with the New Left student movement, some radical artists also rallied around dismantling the capitalist marketplace that dictated the structure of the elite world of fine art. However, this aim highlighted a problematic tension that would shape the tactics political artists used in spreading their work to wider audiences. As art scholar Francis Frascina points out, “high culture was an important

activity, process, and pleasure for its participants and collectors, many of whom were in the military and science-based corporations and institutes.”

The structure of the art world was built around a class-based consumer economy, and many patrons who supported artists and their work were individual examples of the very system politicized art aimed at tearing down. Antiwar artists found themselves stuck inside a social organization that clashed with their political convictions, and what’s more, they were often dependent on this organization for their livelihoods. As art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson claims, the political art movement was “not primarily concerned with making its images accessible to the very people with whom these artists asserted a fragile solidarity.” This tension created an interesting inconsistency and potential weakness of the artistic antiwar movement. Although their work echoed anti-commercial leftist ethics, it remained ensconced within the capitalist art tradition.

But another source of dissatisfaction arose, one that seemed much more compatible with the realities of the art system. Just as the New Left chose the university as its battle ground, radical artists chose the art world’s institutional corollary: the museum. Art museums were attacked for several reasons. First, many trustees invested in companies like Standard Oil and Chase Manhattan Bank, along with those financing the production of napalm, chemical and biological weapons research, and armaments. These companies and industries were directly linked to the Pentagon and to perpetuation of the war. As minimalist artist Carl Andre put it “It is

a pretense of the museum that they are an apolitical organization…The board of trustees are exactly the same people who devised American foreign policy over the last 25 years. Man for man they are the same.”

GAAG and the AWC were devoted to revealing and combating art institutions’ economic policies. They held multiple protests such as those described at the beginning of this chapter to pressure trustees into either removing their support of weapons and oil companies, or removing themselves from the boards of major art museums in New York. In GAAG’s official call for resignation of the Rockefeller family from MoMA’s board of trustees, the authors pointed out how the Rockefellers owned 65 percent of the Standard Oil corporations, a company which had recently leased one of its plants to United Technology Center specifically for the production of napalm. Additionally, the Rockefellers owned 20 percent of the McDonnell Aircraft Corporation, which had been involved in chemical and biological warfare research, and Chase Manhattan Bank, of which David Rockefeller was Chairman of the Board, was represented on the Defense Industry Advisory Council. GAAG attributed this information to several publications on the defense industry to back up their claims, and concluded with “Therefore we demand the immediate resignation of all the Rockefellers from the Board of trustees of the Museum of Modern Art.”

A further offense of art institutions was what many artists saw as an increasingly firm hold over how, when, and where artists’ works were exhibited. To many, the controlling nature of many curators and directors of major art museums

like MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney mirrored the increasingly repressive tactics of the United States government.\(^41\) Political artists grew frustrated when they received little or no support from the larger art institutions that dominated the world of fine art, and some artists focused their energies on “artists’ rights” as they related to the exhibition “as an institutionalized system, and to the definitions of ownership of an artwork.”\(^42\)

While this issue had been gaining momentum for some time, the conflict came to a head in 1969 in a clash between Greek sculptor Takis Vassilakis and MoMA. After promising to transport a specific sculpture of Takis’s from Paris for the exhibit *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, MoMA substituted another piece of his that was already in their possession when the budget prohibited flying the original piece from Paris for the exhibition. Although MoMA owned the substituted sculpture, Takis felt that the piece was outdated and that it didn’t properly reflect his current work. When the museum denied his requests to remove the sculpture from the exhibit, Takis and several friends engaged in a sit-in after storming into the museum, removing the sculpture in question from the exhibit and bringing it to MoMA’s courtyard. Takis also provided signed handbills for onlookers proclaiming that the sit-in “will be just the first in a series of acts against the stagnant policies of art museums all over the world. Let us unite, artists with scientists, students with workers, to change these anachronistic situations into information centers for all


artistic activities.”43 After several hours, the director agreed to take Takis’s sculpture out of the exhibit, and to engage in further discussions over the following months. Art historian Irving Sandler writes that:

[Takis’s] act became a catalyst, activating dozens of younger artists who felt alienated from what they believed to be an ‘art establishment’ in whose decision-making the role of artists had grown progressively less significant…within three months of the sit-in by Takis and his friends, some three hundred Art Workers demonstrated at the Museum of Modern Art.44

Organizing around the museum constituted another pillar of art activism, especially in New York. But artists constantly had to navigate these institutions and their ambiguous position as both “the hand that feeds and the citadel to be stormed.”45

Finally, political artists took issue with art institutions because of their lack of support for political work. This conservative stance stemmed from the prominent modernist doctrine that denounced political or social engagement within art works, and from the general political conservatism exhibited by museum directors and trustees. As protest art gained momentum, institutional conservatism often resulted in circumstances of direct censorship, or deliberate withdrawal of support from antiwar causes. A primary example of this arose when in 1971 the Guggenheim museum in New York cancelled a one-man show by political artist Hans Haacke. Haacke had a history of politically provocative artworks, perhaps the most famous of which was his installation piece Visitor’s Poll (Fig. 3). This piece, which appeared in MoMA in 1970, asked museumgoers to cast their votes into ballot boxes, prompted by a large

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poster asking them “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?” The survey referred to Nelson Rockefeller, the Republican Governor of New York who was running for re-election in 1970, and who had been a member of MoMA’s Board of Trustees since 1932. Based on the results of his survey, Haacke’s audience appeared decisively against the war, and although the phrasing of his question was fairly neutral Haacke’s antiwar stance was apparent.46

Figure 3: Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, Guggenheim Museum, 1971.

The show that was cancelled by the Guggenheim featured several of Haacke’s political installations, the most inflammatory of which was called *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. This work traced the mortgages and properties of the Harry Shapolsky family and associates—one of the largest owners of run-down properties in low-income areas of

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New York. Haacke incorporated photographs of the fronts of the 142 buildings addressed in the exhibit, accompanied by maps, charts outlining business transactions, and data sheets listing the address, lot size, building code, date of acquisition, holding title, and assessed tax value of each property. After weeks of work combing through county documents and newspapers, “Haack produced a mountain of information regarding the spaces of power and capital in Manhattan” which was subsequently used as evidence in a Village Voice article that designated the Shapolsky group “one of the worst slumlords in New York.”

The exhibit never saw an audience. The show was cancelled before it opened, and Edward Fry, the curator of the exhibit who had worked closely with Haacke on several occasions, was fired. Thomas Messer, director of the Guggenheim museum, denounced the work as nothing but a “muckraking venture.” In his press release addressing the cancellation of the show, Messer argued that Haacke’s work was unacceptable because of its “reduction of the work of art from its potential metaphoric level to a form of photojournalism concerned with topical statements rather than with symbolic expression” to which Haacke responded that his work was merely a presentation of the facts, and contained no political bias. However, as in the work Visitor’s Poll at MoMA, Haacke’s political leanings were not difficult to glean from his choice of subject matter. Regardless of the intent of the work, its political undertones were unacceptable to the Guggenheim’s strict adherence to pure art. This example demonstrates the stringency of institutions’ views of art’s role,

48 Ibid., 204.
49 Ibid.
which, whether they were exacerbated by political convictions that ran counter to those of artists or not, often kept political work at a safe distance from museum audiences.

Like museums, the tradition of art criticism often put a stopper in the political efforts of its subjects. Here another parallel with the New Left arose. Media scholar Edward P. Morgan uses the *New York Times* coverage of the wider antiwar movement to illustrate how the image of the New Left student movement was shaped in the public eye:

> By passing over the content of antiwar criticism, balancing antiwar and pro-war, highlighting the attire or behavior of protesters, [and] dichotomously depicting “legitimate” and “illegitimate” dissent…the *Times* passed along a picture of reality to its readers likely to strike most as outside their cognitive or sympathetic range.\(^5\)

In the same way that Americans’ opinion of the antiwar protest was shaped by the news media, so was their outlook on protest art shaped by the art critics who reviewed and commented on political art actions and exhibitions. The 1960s saw a noticeable increase in the amount of print coverage the arts received. A hose of journals arose, as well as numerous collections of essays, making coverage of the fine arts in popular media outlets wider and more varied than ever before.\(^5\) Critics’ steadfast focus on the formal shortcomings of political work, rather than on its intent, drew attention to the impossibility of political art’s assimilation into wider art culture. Critic giants like Grace Glueck and Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times* spearheaded this trend,

showing another aspect of traditional art institutions’ lack of support for protest art. Lodged inside the fervent debate of form versus content, the political message of the protest art often fell into the background.

There is no better example of this attitude than art critic Hilton Kramer. Kramer worked as primary art critic for the *New York Times* from 1965 to 1982, at which point he left the *Times* to found *The New Criterion*, a conservative arts journal. That his new journal “need not subscribe to the shibboleths of the political Left, that it might even question and criticize the role played by political radicalism in the arts” was a fundamental reason for Kramer’s founding of the magazine. Through the political art movement, Kramer was continually frustrated by artists’ abandonment of the formal traditions of art, and made this opinion known when he critiqued their shows. Although he was not without sympathy for their cause, and in some cases reluctantly supported political happenings in the art world, his disgust for art that let politics seep into the canvass itself was vehement. His patronizing tone and focus on lack of esthetic value, which characterized much of the art criticism that came out of the media, devalued artists’ political message and disempowered the movement as a whole.

Reviewing a 1967 exhibition of protest art entitled “Protest and Hope,” Kramer singled the show out as:

One of the most depressing I have ever seen, and it is depressing not only or primarily because of what it tells us about the condition of American life at the present moment—in this respect the show is to be welcomed—but because

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it reveals the almost total esthetic bankruptcy of our artists when it comes to dealing with issues beyond their customary specialized concerns.\(^5^3\)

While Kramer does imply a tentative solidarity with the show’s political message, the remainder of the article draws attention to the works’ aesthetic shortcomings, writing that “some of these artists have simply abandoned their own standards entirely” or arguing that collage artists’ use of photographic images from the news trivialized rather than denounced the atrocities depicted. Red Grooms, a cartoon artist whose work Kramer claims he usually admires, submitted works that, “with their comic-strip style and exuberant good cheer, prove to be helpless as a medium of political satire.” Kramer’s jibes at these artists’ choices in medium and style seem patronizing and dismissive, depicting the artists as utterly powerless, and the show as an artistic failure. There is no indication in Kramer’s article that “Protest and Hope” could affect politics internal to the art world, or challenge traditional ideas about art’s subject matter. Kramer’s bitter critique also found its way to the politics and strategies of the AWC, when he wrote that the group didn’t “believe in the principle of museums” when the AWC called for the dispersal of some of MoMA’s work so as to make room for more works by contemporary artists.\(^5^4\) Kramer took issue with the movement not for its politics, but because it challenged his own conceptions of what constitutes good art.

Examples of this sort of criticism of political efforts were common in the discourse of art critics, and often detracted from the power of dissenting artworks.

Perhaps the best known is the 1966 Tower for Peace, which according to Frascina


was a renewed effort to attract national attention after newspaper ads like the large “End Your Silence” page in the *New York Times* were largely unsuccessful. The structure loomed over La Cienega and Sunset Boulevards in Los Angeles, attracting passersby from blocks around to examine the 60-foot high structure (Fig. 4). Arranged by the Artists’ Protest Committee (APC), an organization of political artists based on the West Coast, the structure was surrounded by 418 two-foot-square paintings each donated by an individual artist.

Built under the direction of sculptor Mark di Suvero and architect Kenneth H. Dillon, the Tower was remarkable for the mobilization of so many artists in a collective protest effort. Some of the panels donated were openly critical of the war, while others took a more abstract path. After the Tower was dismantled the panels were sold anonymously in a lottery put on by a local peace center, a solution that appeased artists on both sides of this debate. While a discussion of this work’s meaning to political artists’ movements as a whole will follow in the next chapter, this “visually pluralistic” approach was unique in that it incorporated artists who openly denounced the war in their work, as well as those who chose to let the medium and form of their art speak for itself, thus erasing some of the fractures politics caused within the art world.

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Figure 4: Artists’ Protest Committee, Tower for Peace, Los Angeles, 1966.

One of the strange features of the Tower for Peace action is that it received so little attention from the press. Although Los Angeles newspapers reported on it extensively in 1966, the Tower didn’t become nationally recognized until it appeared on the cover of the 1971 November-December issue of *Art in America*, when the recent agitations of the AWC and various art strikes gave new meaning to its message and revived its political impact. The original hesitancy on the part of national press may have been due to an inability to classify such an innovative structure. Even Susan Sontag, whom Bryan-Wilson calls “one of the most incisive and articulate critics of the twentieth century” calls the tower “a big thing to stand here.” As Bryan-

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Wilson points out, “that her eloquence is reduced to monosyllables indicates her uncertainty about what, indeed, the function of such a monument might be.” Indeed, the work was a highly original example of a new kind of protest art. Such a public, organized display of artists’ opposition to the Vietnam War was unprecedented and surprising. As Art Seidenbaum, a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, indicated in an article about the Tower: “for artists to share space with each other, voluntarily, for anything, represents a rare compromise with impoverished individualism.”

A more far-reaching explanation for the press’s silence on this matter, however, and one in keeping with critics’ responses to similar events, is that the modernist doctrine made institutions and critics reluctant to recognize the work as a viable piece of art. Falling in step with the likes of Kramer and Glueck, Seidenbaum ended his article by asking “is this tower, regardless of what it means and why it was hammered up, a good or bad piece of art?” *Artforum*, with its offices nestled in the Tower’s backyard and its editor, Philip Leider, in the same social world as many dissenting artists, was a publication well-placed to include a piece on the Tower, in the form of a review, an article, or at the very least an advertisement. But when Leider was approached about the possibility of providing press coverage for the work, he declined, insisting that “art and politics do not mix.”

Francis Frascina asserts that “Leider clearly wished to keep the journal ‘pure’, uncontaminated by something other. Other, that is, than the ‘conventional nature of art’…and the legitimated world

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60 Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 82-84.
of galleries and critics." Curiously, Leider would later give his individual support to various artistic protests against the Vietnam War. However, his refusal to commit Artforum to support of these activities implies the immense difference between individuals’ convictions, and institutional statements of similar political convictions.

Art criticism was stuck in the rut of modernist purity, which disallowed overt political statements for fear of tarnishing the integrity of the institution.

Meyer Schapiro was another prominent critic who declined to support political happenings in the art world. In February of 1970, the Art Workers’ Coalition and Artists and Writers Protest decided seek Pablo Picasso’s assistance in their antiwar efforts. These groups sent out invitations to prominent members of the New York art community to sign a letter to Picasso, which asked him to

Tell the directors and trustees of the Museum of Modern Art in New York that Guernica cannot remain on public view there as long as American troops are committing genocide in Vietnam. Renew the outcry of Guernica by telling those who remain silent in the face of Mylai [sic] that you remove from them the moral trust as guardians of your painting.\textsuperscript{62}

Picasso’s Guernica had become a rallying point and highly meaningful symbol because of its strong symbolism and historical resonance as a meaningful piece of antiwar art. Although by March of that year the AWC and AWP had assembled a list of 265 signatures to accompany their request, Meyer Schapiro’s was not among them. He replied with this justification for his decision:

To ask Picasso to withdraw his painting from the Museum because of the massacre at Mylai is to charge the Museum with moral complicity in the crimes of the military. This I cannot do. Though I share your feelings about

\textsuperscript{61} Francis Frascina, \textit{Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 84.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, 161.
the government’s whole action in Vietnam, I will not sign your letter to Picasso.\textsuperscript{63}

Schapiro’s decision was a curious one given his past contributions to leftist antiwar activities. Over his years as a New York intellectual, he had shown support of multiple movements, such as the Tower for Peace, Angry Arts week, a week-long demonstration in which some 600 artists gathered in New York to put on shows of art, music, dance, photography, film, and poetry, and various other petitions and actions protesting the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{64} Schapiro’s choice, like Leider’s, shows the inflexible position of the art institution in art culture of the 1960s and early 1970s. Individually, members could provide financial or organizational support for the protests that grew more and more popular among artists, they could add their name to petitions, or they could become involved in coordinating these events themselves. But the refusal of these two prominent figures in the art world to commit either \textit{Artforum} or MoMA to a political stance shows an unswerving adherence both to the idea that artistic integrity depended on formal purity, and that institutions of high art were particularly bound to upholding this purity.

For a fleeting moment in 1970, it seemed MoMA might sway from this resolve when three members of the Art Workers’ Coalition collaborated to create and distribute an antiwar poster under the auspices of the museum. The AWC’s poster \textit{Q. And Babies? A. And Babies} (Fig. 5) derived its name and text from a CBS interview with veteran Paul Meadlo, a participant in the 1968 My Lai massacre. Perhaps the

\textsuperscript{63} Francis Frascina, \textit{Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 161.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 162.
most infamous of all the atrocities known to have occurred during the war, My Lai involved the gruesome slaughter of Vietnamese citizens without regard to age, sex, or any perceivable threat. The interviewer, Mike Wallace of CBS, questioned Meadlo about the details of those murdered: “And Babies?” “And Babies,” Meadlo answered. These two lines, question and answer, were set against the backdrop of Ron Haeberle’s photograph of a heap of Vietnamese bodies lying on a dirt road after the massacre.

Figure 5: The Art Workers Coalition, *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies*, 1970.

The idea for the poster stemmed from an ongoing debate between Hilton Kramer and certain members of the AWC including Lucy Lippard, Hans Haacke, and Fraser Dougherty, as to whether MoMA’s trustees’ investments in corporations aiding the war effort committed the museum to a certain political stance. After Kramer chided the AWC for politicizing art, the AWC responded with the point that MoMA was in fact conservatively politicized because of the economic policies of its
investors. Kramer responded that although trustees “are likely to be conservative in their social values” such actions did not amount to politicization of the institution.65 These competing viewpoints were typical of changing concepts of the political in 1960s America. While Kramer held to the more traditional conception of politics, the AWC adopted the wider definition, holding that there is no difference between actions and politics, and that subsequently everything is political.

As historian Bradford Martin has noted, “the AWC’s strategy to expose the inherent politicization of museums involved pressuring them to make public statements on political issues.” 66 When the AWC proposed the idea to the museum’s Executive Staff Committee, they were rewarded with an endorsement of AWC member Irving Petlin’s proposal that “the Museum should issue a vast distribution of a poster so violently outraged at [the My Lai massacre] that it will place absolutely in print and in public the feeling that this Museum […] is outraged by the massacre at [My Lai].” 67 The AWC and the Executive Staff Committee came to a tentative agreement that the AWC would pay for the poster, while MoMA handled distribution through the outlets of other museums. However, when this decision was run by the trustees, this tentative partnership between the AWC and MoMA vanished. Walter S. Paley, current president of the Board of Trustees, and the Rockefellers bluntly objected to such a partnership. Petlin provides an explanation for their decision, saying “it had to do with [Nelson] Rockefeller’s idea of the Museum of Modern Art

as a temple apart, as a citadel apart, which doesn’t deal in the dirty business of the world. Certainly he knew plenty about the dirty business of the world.”

How much the trustees’ decision had to do with their own politics, and how much with their idealization of art as a medium free from political contamination is impossible to say. The poster was produced by the AWC without the institutional support of MoMA, a development that gave the now independent project a stronger sense of self-determination and autonomy. While this is yet another example of stringent institutional action shortstopping political mobilization, it also evidences a clear success for the AWC, and for the wider protest art movement. Despite MoMA’s retraction of its support, the AWC was able to produce and distribute 50,000 copies of the poster, resulting in what Irving Sandler would call “one of the most effective anti-war gestures in the art world.” In its press release regarding the event, the AWC confirmed that “An artist-sponsored poster protesting the […] massacre will receive vast distribution. But the Museum’s unprecedented decision to make known, as an institution, its commitment to humanity, has been denied it.”

The story of political protests of this period is one of both careful navigation and forceful rejection of the status quo. The support for political art that the WPA provided in the 1930s had long since disappeared, replaced by an art culture that regarded socially and politically concerned art as low-grade, inferior work that relied on its message rather than its quality for import. As certain artists became more and

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more disturbed by reports of American military escalation in Vietnam, they turned their creativity towards producing politicized art, feeling that any other action would be trivialized in light of the chaos of modern society. Along with protest against the war, the movement took up a number of other agendas, including protesting for artists’ rights to decide the conditions under which their works were exhibited. However, the strict expectations of art that had developed over the past decades hardened institutions and critics to these causes. Institutions could not ignore political art’s aesthetic shortcomings, tending to ignore or overlook its potential to provoke real political change. Without the support of museums, art critics, and the rest of the art world, these political artists had to engineer new ways to spread their message to a wider audience. As the following chapter shows, political artists saw their most tangible influence when they either avoided these institutions completely, or used the breadth of imagery available to them in a media-dominated world to open up the protest movement to more varied audiences, creating a new sphere of protest that would allow popularization of their work without the aid of the art culture that had weakened their influence in the first place.
Chapter 2  
Public Presence, Democratization, and the Power of the Image

“Unless protest appears on the streets, it is like the unheard sound in the forest.”

-Ralph Shikes

Hans Haacke’s installation piece MoMA-Poll greeted museumgoers at the entrance to the exhibit Information, the first international survey of conceptual art at an American institution (Fig. 6). Haacke’s piece prompted viewers to submit ballots in response to this question: “Would the fact that Governor [Nelson] Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?” Visitors were given color-coded ballots that corresponded to the price of their admission so that it was possible to distinguish between the responses of full-fare visitors, members, guest-pass holders, and those who came on the museum’s free day. After entering their answer into one of two transparent ballot boxes, visitors watched their vote be tallied by a counting device, and on the wall next to the piece was a chart indicating day-by-day results. Although before the show opened Haacke by no means thought the results were a forgone conclusion, the end tallies show public opinion largely against Nelson Rockefeller’s reelection, as well as against Nixon’s Vietnam War policies. 25,566 people (69 percent) voted “yes” while 11,563 (31 percent) voted “no.”

72 Lucy R. Lippard, A Different War: Vietnam in Art (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1990), 27.
The results of this art piece show the demographic attending exhibitions at MoMA already overwhelmingly against the war, which, although perhaps encouraging, simply amounted to preaching to the choir. Therefore, the issue of how to reach an even larger, wider audience was always at the forefront of protesting artists’ minds, and the question became one of how to reach people outside of the usual museum crowds, and how to alert wider society to artists’ opposition to the war. Artists settled on two main solutions to this dilemma. The first, as Shikes’ quote introducing this chapter suggests, was to take the protest “to the streets.” Using strategies similar to the direct action tactics of the Civil Rights movement and the New Left, artists made use of public space and performance to directly provoke
strong reactions to their art and politics. By making use of “ideas of the ‘space,’ the ‘theater,’ the disposable and transitory life of the streets,” artists eluded institutional control and censorship, while also reaching a diverse audience.74

The other major strategy that found success in galvanizing a wider audience was the use of powerful symbolic imagery in protest art. By invoking images to which audiences felt strong historical, commercial, or emotional attachment, provocative protest pieces often elicited heated reactions from audiences that show the power of protest art to deeply affect viewers. Using these two tactics, artists redefined what success meant. Works involving these powerful protest strategies were able to shed conventional notions of success that involved monetary gain and critical acclaim as upheld by major art institutions. Instead, they adopted a wider goal: to provoke intense responses in audiences outside the usual museum crowd, and to bring their protest outside of the institution to political festivals, mass artist strikes, and the mainstream media, where they hoped the physicality and urgency of their message would spread beyond the confines of their work, and into the streets.

Bradford D. Martin’s book “The Theater is in the Streets: Politics and Performance in Sixties America” delves into the close relationship between artists’ political groups, most prominently the AWC, and public performance. He argues that the politics of performance taken “to the streets” constitutes a recurring theme throughout the 1960s, naming several other political organizations that adopted similar strategies, namely the Diggers, the Freedom Singers of the Civil Rights movement, the anarchist and pacific Living Theater troupe, and finally, the Art

74 Francis Frascina, Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 29.
Workers’ Coalition and its sub-group the Guerrilla Art Action Group. Martin believes that combining spectacle and public performance with politics proved essential to the struggle in which the AWC and GAAG were engaged.\textsuperscript{75} This analysis can be extended farther, however, for this aspect of dissent spread beyond the AWC and GAAG, appearing in both New York and Los Angeles, the major centers of art activism during this period. Through their use of direct action and spectacle performance, activist artists maintained an inventive flow of strikes, protests, and performances that both evaded institutional confines, and piqued curiosity in communities that might not otherwise have been exposed to such vehement forms of protest.

The most famous example of street-based protest has already been discussed. The Tower for Peace, built in 1966 by the Artists’ Protest Committee, “enabled the idea of protesting against the war to break through the film, the ‘scrim,’ that prevented the protest from being a worldwide effort,” according to Irving Petlin.\textsuperscript{76} Artists took great care to build the tower in a location that would be visible to many different kinds of people. Presumably hoping to attract the most attention, The Artists’ Protest Committee

Positioned [the Tower] in an empty lot. […] At a busy intersection, the Peace Tower sought to maximize its visibility within West Hollywood; the nearby “gallery row” on La Cienega secured the area as an epicenter of contemporary art. But rather than use the existing spaces for art, the Peace Tower became an alternative, public exhibition site outside the art institution.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Bradford D. Martin, \textit{The Theater is in the Streets} (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 127.
\textsuperscript{76} Francis Frascina, \textit{Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 64.
The placement of the Tower for Peace attracted members of both the nearby artist community as well as passersby who would be unfamiliar with the artists’ cause, and the manner in which the project was carried out from beginning to end was highly unusual in that it confronted passersby directly. No entry into a gallery space or museum was necessary, broadening the project’s audience to include different class and race backgrounds.

Ultimately, onlookers were not always thrilled to see the monstrosity in their neighborhood. Art Seidenbaum’s *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the project reported that “a whole lot of gnashing and snarling and some vandalism are going on because of the Artists’ Tower Against the War in Vietnam.” From Seidenbaum’s article, it seems viewers were frustrated with artists’ “gall,” wondering, in Seidenbaum’s words, “who are they to tell us?” The article also describes grumbling passersby, and their complaints that “Hell, they’re only doing it for the publicity.” 78 While perhaps the Tower was not exceedingly popular with the locals, it remains one of the most often cited examples of political protest in the art world because of the innovative strategies it pioneered for dissenting art. By placing the work in an extremely public, well-trafficked area, its creators lessened their reliance on media to help spread their message, while also lessening the class divide evident in audiences at galleries and museums. Likewise, dependence on institutions was circumvented, and the scope of the project brought in help from as far afield as Paris.

While the artists lost their rights to the property after three months when their landlord refused to renew their lease, and public reception of the tower was mixed,

this sort of public art completely evaded the sphere of the museum, the exhibition, and the art dealer. Although it flummoxed critics and institutions, the tower remains one of the best examples of ways in which active artists avoided interacting with the institutions that had previously held so much sway in their creative lives. Many artists would come to regard this manner of dissent as “crucial both to the anti-war movement and to a critique of the capitalist fascination with the cult of artistic persona characteristic of the gallery and the museum system.”

Among the protest movements set in motion by the Tower for Peace was ‘Angry Arts Week,’ a 1967 mass demonstration on the opposite coast in which some 600 artists participated. This protest flooded New York with art, music, dance, photography, film, and poetry events, including a collection of pieces titled The Collage of Indignation to which 150 artists contributed over the course of the week.

The Collage of Indignation played a peculiar role, in that it allowed artists who normally kept politics out of their work to abandon formal and technical restrictions to which they normally adhered. Leon Golub’s view of the piece typified many artists’ outlook: “This is not political art,” he wrote, “but rather an expression of popular revulsion. [...] Essentially the work is angry—against the war, against the bombing, against President Johnson, etc. The Collage is gross, vulgar, clumsy, ugly.” In an interview just several months after Angry Arts Week, Golub stated that

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80 Ibid., 64.
for him “[the Collage] wasn’t really intended as art but as demonstration.” In keeping with this view, Irving Petlin, who although he involved himself in numerous demonstrations against the war generally kept politics out of his art, submitted a piece with an unflattering portrait of LBJ, with the caption “LBJ, infant people burner / Long may you roast in History’s Hell!” The raw, unpolished nature of many of the contributions allowed artists who didn’t normally allow politics into their work to experiment within the new criteria, which valued emotional intensity over formal conformity. The sense that the work was, as Golub said, a demonstration rather than a work of art gave artists like Petlin freedom to try their hand at explicitly political art.

Angry Arts was a success in several ways. Firstly, it dwarfed other protests in scale and diversity, incorporating artists from numerous disciplines and professions. The New York Times article publicizing the protest listed various performances and events, among them a “chilling documentary” paralleling the Vietnam War with German concentration camps that had drawn an audience of 500, and a theater event called “Broadway Dissents” attended by an audience of 2,000. The action made news in Washington D.C. where the Washington Post declared it “a massive experiment in the use of art media to express protest against the war. In scale, diversity, and wealth of participating talent, it is unprecedented.” Collage participant Marc Morrel also declared the collective artwork a success, but for different reasons. On the second day of the protest, a piece submitted by Morrel was

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removed from the *Collage* because it incorporated a facsimile of the American flag. Censored on the advice of John Blazys, coordinator of security at New York University where the *Collage* was lodged, the piece was removed because university authorities were fearful of legal repercussions aimed at a disrespectful representation of the flag. In a press release, the Artists and Writers Protest committee called the removal of Morrel’s work “an act of unwarranted censorship on the part of New York University.”  

But Morrel recalls the *Collage* fondly nonetheless:

> It was big and it was fun. It upset an awful lot of people and it brought the people there. N.Y.U was mobbed from the time it was opened to the time it shut. As a matter of fact, we had to keep the people out the last night when we were closing it and they were still trying to sneak through the guards to get in and see it. I think it was very effective. You see, I judge effectiveness by the police force and the police force was there and they stopped it.  

Angry Arts Week and other protest festivals such as the gallery “White-Out” in Los Angeles – an evening during which galleries along an entire street promoted their opposition to the war – mobilized whole neighborhoods, creating a physical protest space that, like the Tower, could reach a multitude of audiences. Frascina, writing on the significance of the “White-Out,” notes that “the participation of galleries and artists in such a political act was not only novel for those not noted for such acts, but also, as Petlin recalls, very ‘moving’. The symbol was crucial.”

Performance and collectivity constituted one of the main ethics of the Guerrilla Art Action Group. The “Blood Bath” protest described at the beginning of

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the previous chapter is a perfect example of taking art protest to the streets and making use of novel protest methods. “Having witnessed other artist groups unsuccessfully attempt to affect political change through picketing and issuing demands, [Jon] Hendricks and [Jean] Tosh decided to ‘put their bodies on the line’ and employ dramatic strategies to present their views,” Julie Ault writes. Artists such as these resorted to visual shock as a way of being noticed, and the sight of protesters rolling on the floor in gallons of cow blood, in the middle of the Museum of Modern Art no less, was certainly striking. While this was a relatively small performance involving only five people, its frequent mention in scholarship since then suggests that the impression it made was disproportionate to its size. Although it addressed audiences already somewhat involved in the art world, it sought to inform them of the museum’s involvement in the war effort, a topic with which they were likely less familiar. Their status as patrons of MoMA made their awareness all the more critical to GAAG.

What’s more, this sort of protest allowed artists to step out of what was considered the relatively elitist circle of artists, critics, and dealers that comprised the art community. Bringing the protest into the realm of the neighborhood can be seen as a sort of peace offering, a willingness on the part of traditionally distanced artists to “descend” to the level of the everyday and the familiar. The fact that the Tower for Peace was visible throughout its construction helped to demystify the artistic process, just as the assembly and organization of such a huge event as Angry Arts Week was

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also visible from the ground up. The incorporation of these artists and the events they organized into the communities surrounding their protests facilitated personal interaction between artists and their audience, which added to the power of dissident art, as well as encouraged audience participation and involvement in the protest.\footnote{Julia Bryan-Wilson, \textit{Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era} (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 221.}

This strategy was useful in empowering political happenings in the art world, but artists who sought to make an impact with their own work ran into different troubles. In 1967 Ad Reinhardt voiced a dilemma that plagued artists constantly throughout the Vietnam War era. “There are no effective paintings or objects that one can make against the war. There’s been a complete exhaustion of images.”\footnote{Ad Reinhardt, interview by Jeanne Siegel, "Ad Reinhardt: Art as Art," \textit{Great Artists in America Today}, WBAI, New York, June 13, 1967.} As television came into maturity and mass advertising reached new prowess in an increasingly consumerist society, American attachment to the visual image intensified, forcing political artists to vie with the multitude of images Americans were exposed to during their everyday lives. By 1960, 87 percent of American homes owned at least one television, and in 1962, \textit{Time} magazine reported that Americans were exposed to a minimum of 1,600 ads each day.\footnote{Erika Doss, \textit{Twentieth-Century American Art} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155.} Billboards, newspapers, movies, magazines, and television presented the public with a constant stream of information packaged in visual imagery. As the first war to be broadcast to the American public since the explosion of mass media and advertising of the late 1950s and early 1960s, images of Vietnam were included in this development. Spreads of war photographs splashed the pages of \textit{Time} and \textit{Life} magazines, and Vietnam earned...
its titles ‘the first TV war’ and ‘the living-room war’ because of the countless American families who gathered in their living rooms each night to watch the stream of news footage. As media scholar Andrew Hoskins put it, “In this environment a television war could not fail to fulfill the early promise of the medium in sweeping middle America in its image(s) [sic], notably through graphic and daily pictures of the real and bloody consequences of war.”  

Artists sympathetic to the antiwar cause were often frustrated with the abundance of war images in the media. Although still strongly opposed to the war, many felt that artists “should participate in any protests against war—as a human being.” Their outside lives could be political, as long as politics were shed upon entering the studio. This uncertainty about the sufficiency of art to “oppose a war-saturated media culture” permeated the world of political artists. In her 2004 interview for the publication *Border Crossings*, Nancy Spero states that the mingling of Vietnam war images and advertising images on television often made her question the effectiveness of her artwork in eliciting a popular response. “I wasn’t sure who the audience was, or even if I had an audience,” she admitted. Many artists felt they were sending out political statements into empty space, and artists often grew discouraged by the boundaries convention placed on their art. In a 1967 interview, Ad

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Reinhardt insisted that “as an artist you can only reach those people who are willing to meet you more than half way [...] that’s the fine artist’s problem now.”

Some sources oversimplify this tension by arguing that political work produced during the Vietnam era wasn’t as important as comparable work of other periods, purely because mass audiences relied more heavily on television as a source of information than on other mediums, fine art among them. However, this viewpoint is simplistic, and doesn’t do justice to the complex relationship between artists, the public, and war images. The 1960s witnessed the transition of news coverage from a print industry to a television one, in which audiences were getting the majority of their information about the war from the televised news coverage. Although this transition could be discouraging to artists like Reinhardt and Spero, who felt that the growing dependence on visual imagery in everyday life detracted from the symbolic and visual power of their works, some of the most compelling protest art profited greatly from the public’s relationship with the visual image. By taking images that were familiar to audiences—either from television, advertising, or history—and repositioning them in protest of governmental policies, oppositional artists elicited strong audience responses and drove new demographics to take notice of their work.

Political artists’ use of images drew heavily on techniques established by Pop artists. Works like Warhol’s 32 Campbell’s Soup Cans took commonplace household products and sensationalized them, giving this image a new status in American pop culture. Lichtenstein’s works mirrored comic strips of the era, again taking familiar, nearby sources of visual imagery and recontextualizing them to make a political statement.

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98 Jeanne Siegal, Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 112.
unremarkable aspect of American life and examining them from a new angle that both ironically glorified the banal images, while also critiquing their ubiquity and standardization. Critic Lawrence Alloway described an important feature of Pop when he wrote:

The core of Pop art is…essentially, an art about signs and sign systems. Realism is, to offer a minimal definition, concerned with the artist’s perception of objects in space and their translation into iconic, or faithful, signs. However, Pop art deals with material that already exists as signs: photographs, brand goods, comics—that is to say, with precoded material.\(^{100}\)

The works of the Pop period embraced the post-war abundance of media and advertising, but they also poked fun at the mass-produced image with a “snickering vulgarity” that came to be characteristic of the Pop movement.\(^{101}\) Although their art was not explicitly political, The key difference between Pop artists like Warhol and political artists who followed—for example Peter Saul, Martha Rosler, and Leon Golub—was not usually in form, but in content and tone. Although not overtly concerned with politics, Pop art’s transformation of the everyday object into an image with stature and evocative power was an important stepping-stone to the most persuasive antiwar art.\(^{102}\) As the Vietnam War grew more heated, Pop artists would occasionally join into protest activities, such as the 1970 withdrawal from the Venice Biennale. Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg joined a group of 24 artists led by the AWC in removing their works from the international art exhibition where countries were represented by the works they submitted. “Our


decision to withdraw,” remembered AWC member Irving Petlin, was an “effort to make a strong statement that we would not stand for using artists as a cultural fig leaf.” These artists agreed that they must remove their own work from the system responsible for the continuation of the Vietnam War, and in a rare moment of convergence, Pop artists and political artists joined forces. However, examples of this sort of partnership are sparse, and for the most part Pop artists remained in the realm of the apolitical.

In the protest art of the late 1960s and 1970s, symbols became standardized, just as Jasper Johns’ flags and Warhol’s soup cans had become an established part of the Pop art lexicon. These images included eagles, swastikas, weaponry, certain iconic photographs like Nick Ut’s “Vietnam Napalm” (1972) or Eddie Addams’ “The Execution” (1968), and many critical variations on the American flag that Johns’ work had set in motion. This non-exhaustive list provided artists with a powerful array of images, symbols, and icons that, at their best, effectively challenged the triumphalism, apathy, and the lack of transparency that perpetuated the Vietnam War.

Jasper Johns offers the best example of the intersection between Pop art and political art. Although rarely cited alongside overtly political artists, Johns straddled these two disciplines throughout his career. While his work was rarely overtly political, there was always the nagging suspicion among his followers that it could be. In addition, his usage of the American flag in his work popularized a trend that would continue well through the 1970s, which involved creative re-assemblage of the flag, often in a highly irreverent manner. Johns’ best-known work, Flag, sent artists and

103 Bradford D. Martin, The Theater is in the Streets (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 146.
critics alike into a still-unresolved debate questioning his political intent at the time.

A 1967 panel addressing the place of politics in art gives a sense of how ambiguous and inscrutable Flag could be:

Ad Reinhardt: Remember Jasper Johns’ flags? There was something comic and satirical about that when it was first shown. I don’t know whether it was camp or what and the New York World’s Fair used [Flag] and they played America the Beautiful with it […] There is some confusion between what the artist had in mind and what actually happened—the problem is what do these images do?

Leon Golub: Let’s say that in these flags there is a certain element of satire, of irony, of disengagement, even of nostalgia. But the threats that are involved in Jasper Johns’ flags are minimal. That’s why they can be used in a World’s Fair and everything else.¹⁰⁴

Despite this ambiguity, Johns repeatedly insisted that his Flag series was not meant to be a political statement of any sort. Rather, the image of the flag provided an appropriate subject for Johns’ line of experiments in representation and replication. Johns further dissuaded those set on finding a political message in his piece by telling his viewers that the idea for Flag came to him in a dream.¹⁰⁵

Whatever the artist’s intentions however, his work was immediately endowed with all sorts of extra-personal meanings.¹⁰⁶ In keeping with the cold detachment evident in most of Johns’ works, his highly symbolic paintings were meant to elicit not sympathy, but personal disruption. Critic Leo Steinberg, after visiting Johns’ 1958 show at the Leo Castelli gallery, seemed deeply disturbed by Johns’ work. In a 1962 review for Harper’s magazine, he noticed that “the pictures remained with me—

¹⁰⁴ Jeanne Siegal, Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 107.
working on me and depressing me. The thought of them gave me a distinct sense of threatening loss or destruction.”

Whatever Johns’ objective in painting his *Flag* series, he set the ball rolling. In scrutinizing the practically holy symbol of American patriotism and citizenship Johns established a motif in American art that would prove invaluable to his predecessors seeking to use the flag in a climate of dissent and deep criticism.

The extreme veneration of the American flag that characterized the 1950s perhaps made the flag desecration craze of the 1970s an inevitability. The middle years of the 1950s “represented something of a peak in veneration of the American flag as a totem of nativist conformity” art scholar Thomas Crow notes. The American landscape was becoming increasingly familiar as artists and writers of the decade became sociologists of a sort, exploring different views of American life and shaping their work into an exploration of the American hinterland. With a new and expanded awareness of American culture, patriotism flourished, and “within nationalist ideology, the American flag was a symbol of particular values and beliefs that remained unquestioned and which must not be ‘desecrated’ [becoming] a secular symbol endowed with religious majesty and religious reverence” writes art scholar Francis Frascina. This burgeoning reverence certainly made artists’ use of the flag in their work protesting the Vietnam War exceedingly inflammatory.

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The flag art of the Vietnam era, although following in Jasper Johns’ footsteps, took criticism of the American flag to an extreme level, which resulted in one of the major flag desecration controversies in American history.\textsuperscript{111} While Johns is credited with having popularized scrutiny of the flag, artist Wally Hedrick in fact used it in a 1953 piece protesting Cold War adventurism and the loss of lives in the Korean War, well before Johns’ 1958 show at the Leo Castelli gallery. Hedrick’s early piece, now lost, showed a crumpled flag with the word “peace” spattered across it in stylized lettering.\textsuperscript{112} Several years later Claes Oldenburg picked up where Johns left off, creating a series of flag works made of a variety of crude, rough materials. This 1960-1961 series was both a denunciation of traditional conceptions of art, as well as traditional ideas about patriotism and the United States. One piece in the series,

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“U.S.A. Flag”, was made of muslin cloth soaked in plaster, and then laid over a wire frame (Fig. 7). The piece looked childish and gauche. Painted sloppily in primary colors, with mere white smudges for the stars, “U.S.A. Flag” was a slap in the face to those who believed in the formal integrity of art, as well as to the patriotic traditionalists who found such unrefined depictions of “Old Glory” offensive and immature.¹¹³

In light of increasing tension regarding patriotism and nationalism, artists often found themselves the objects of legal and administrative efforts to quash usage of the Stars and Stripes in dissident art forms. By 1932 every state had passed its own law banning flag desecration in various forms, but the popularization of this form of protest in the 1960s caused the federal government to pass its own law prohibiting disrespectful use of the American flag in 1968.¹¹⁴ In the late 1960s, protesters often burned flags at large public protests, wore the flag on the seats of their pants, and flew the flag upside-down. The 1968 legislation was an effort to both deter this activity, and to “punish anyone who knowingly cast contempt upon any flag of the United States by publicly mutilating, defacing, defiling, burning, or trampling upon it. With a possible five-year prison sentence if found guilty, such legislation was a serious dissuasion to any protester.”¹¹⁵ This method of protest spread quickly into the art world, for the flag had become a very potent symbol of blind patriotism and undiscriminating support of governmental policies. Although they often presented

¹¹⁵ Francis Frascina, Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 120.
harsh outcomes for perpetrators, examples of censorship and legal prosecution within the art world show the force of the American flag as an icon of dissent that was successful in its attempts to elicit audience response.

Artist Marc Morrel repeatedly found himself at the center of struggles between artists fighting for the freedom to use the flag in their political work and New York legal and administrative powers disallowing this freedom. His works often involved the American flag or its facsimile, sometimes in chains, sometimes hung from a noose, but always in provocative positions that challenged traditional notions of patriotism, and portrayed the flag as a symbol of rampant governmental power.116 In a 1967 panel discussion, Morrel defended his form of antiwar expression when he said, “I felt that [the American flag] was the one symbol that could reach people other than a burnt or bloody doll or a draft card. This is a very sacred image to some people—the very people we’re fighting, intellectually, not physically, yet.”117 Morrel’s pieces paralleled other protest forms against the Vietnam War, but because of the venerated status the flag held in American culture, his work would provoke extreme responses.

After Morrel’s work was removed from the Collage of Indignation, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it provoked another controversy. In March of 1969, his piece “Flag in Chains” was confiscated by the county sheriff of Macon County, Illinois, where it had previously been available for viewing upon request. The irreverent nature of the sculpture, which featured two flags sewn together, stuffed

116 Francis Frascina, Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 121.
117 Jeanne Siegal, Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 116-117.
with foam rubber, and bound by a large chain, brought about the prosecution of two officials at the Decatur Art Center on grounds of flag desecration. The officials were each fined $75, but the convictions were reversed three years later by the Illinois Supreme Court when prosecution failed to prove that the sculptures were indeed a “disruption of the peace”, which was the basis of the original charges.\textsuperscript{118}

While Morrel’s career certainly underwent setbacks from flag desecration laws, his experience was nothing compared to that of his art dealer, Stephen Radich. In December of 1966 a flag desecration complaint was filed against Radich for showing an array of Morrel’s soft-sculpture works in his private gallery, many of which were rather crude representations of the American flag. Among the most controversial was a flag in the shape of a body bag that hung from a noose, which was displayed prominently in the window of Radich’s second floor gallery on Madison Avenue. Another featured a flag shaped into a phallus, and attached to the base of a cross (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{119} To accompany these sculptures, antiwar songs played in the background. The allegations held that the one-man show was a possible disturbance of the peace, with the potential to arouse the public to potential riot and strife. Furthermore, Morrel’s sculptures were exempt from the law’s allowance of “ornamental objects,” because, as prosecution argued, “three-dimensional sculptures were more likely than pictures to provoke hostilities.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}, 195.
When all was said and done, the litigation lasted for nearly 8 years. After first being found guilty by a three-judge panel in New York City Criminal Court, and sentenced to a $500 fine or sixty days in prison, Radich appealed. The decision was upheld in 1968 by the appeals panel of the New York Supreme Court, again in 1970 by New York’s highest criminal court, the Court of Appeals, and again in 1971 by the U.S. Supreme Court. However, since the verdict of the U.S. Supreme court had in fact resulted in a tie, and thus by default upheld previous verdicts, Radich was able to appeal once more. Finally, on November 7, 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the flag desecration law had in fact been unconstitutionally applied to Radich’s case, thereby concluding the most litigated flag-desecration case in American history.¹²¹

Although to Radich and Morrel there was never any doubt that the sculptures were valid forms of political dissent, this fact was debated to excess in and out of the

courtroom. One critic of his work felt that “you can’t use the flag as a protest. It’s just like you wouldn’t murder your grandmother. The American flag is so high above everything—it’s on a pedestal—that nothing should touch it.” The American flag is so high above everything—it’s on a pedestal—that nothing should touch it.”

In Life magazine’s letters-to-the-editor following the March 3rd article on the Radich case, discussion was equally heated. In addition to this, Radich started receiving violent hate mail linking the flag controversy to his supposed Jewish background (although Radich was not Jewish.) One such letter warned Radich:

You are being watched and checked every day by 50 stars and 50 stripes[,] a group you never heard of or from, now you did, and oh how you will. Signed (100) Patriotic Americans & Christians GOD BLESS AMERICA

This was one of the more tame threats in the letters, some of which made references to acts of torture or concentration camps. This type of reaction is an example of extreme reactions to ‘profane’ use of the American flag. Although it is certainly radical, it demonstrates how deeply the image of the flag could affect the American populace, and the threats of mayhem such irreverence could incite.

But Radich stood his ground. In an unpublished interview with Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Radich defended his choice for the gallery. “I felt that certainly this was the time for this kind of exhibition to be staged,” he explained. “My feelings about our involvement in the Viet Nam War were very strong and I was violently opposed to it and I liked the idea of showing an artist that had the same feeling.” The symbolism of the flag was further articulated in the court

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proceedings, when it was ruled that rather than desecrating the flag, Morrel’s work had harnessed the flag’s power “in all of its communicative majesty, unalloyed and undiminished” by transferring “the symbol from traditional surroundings to the realm of protest and dissent.”  

Radich’s original defender, the ACLU, termed the case one of “cultural suppression,” and claimed that “what is at stake is the right of artists to freely express themselves and to use all the materials available to them.”  However, Radich did not receive support from any major art institution or organization, as Carl Baldwin’s 1974 article in Art in America points out. Although the response from individual members of the art community was “impressive […] Radich went into court as an individual supported by other art-world individuals but without the backing of those key individuals and organizations which constitute the art world’s own governmental machinery.” Later on in the case several art world notables would submit an amici curiae to the court, including John Hightower, then director of MoMA, Karl Katz, director of the Jewish Museum, and Kenneth Dewey of the New York State Commission on Cultural Resources. However, as Baldwin notes, “It should be emphasized that these officials spoke out as individuals and were not empowered to speak for their institutions.” Hightower would later explain to Radich: “As the director of the Museum of Modern Art, I tried to maneuver that enormous and

125 Ibid., 112.
complex ship of culture into submitting an organizational amici brief, without success.”

Institutions’ reluctance to weigh in on the Radich situation seems to be linked to the aesthetic value of Morrel’s art. The director of the Art Institute of Chicago released the statement: “I can only say that it seems to me that the matter is one of a legal technicality rather than one of the artist’s right to choose his own materials. Frankly, however, I do not believe that the American flag, or the flag of any nation for that matter, should be desecrated.” Perhaps the most notable absence from Radich’s support group was the Art Dealers Association of America. The group of 70 prominent art dealers throughout the country declined to get involved on Radich’s behalf. As explanation, the administrative vice-president reasoned that “the case is not a good one to test civil liberties because of the artist’s bad taste.” Baldwin’s article concludes by suggesting that “our art institutions were as supine in the face of a prevailing political climate as were, let us say, those of Napoleon III’s Second Empire.”

But among individual members of the art community, the issue of freedom of artistic expression resonated strongly. A long list of independent art dealers, artists, lesser known critics, and individual members of larger art institutions supported Radich and Morrel throughout the legal proceedings. Even Hilton Kramer, the crotchety New York Times art critic, held that although the works were “rather feeble”

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in aesthetic integrity, they nonetheless should be considered legitimate works of “protest art.” Furthermore, he argued, if indeed the works posed a serious problem when it came to ‘keeping the peace’ “then our society is already far more fragile than even its severest critics have yet supposed.”

Additionally, the media attention that these protest efforts received thanks to their import in a number of different causes and ostentatious use of a political icon exposed artists’ cause to a much wider audience than would otherwise have been possible. Generally speaking, the world of high art was rather inaccessible to the wider public. However, because of these artists’ appropriation of an icon about which the public felt so strongly, the Radich case attracted a great deal of publicity. A major article in *Life* magazine, multiple articles in the *New York Times*, and three pieces in *Art in America* kept the public informed about the high-profile case.

This coverage was fairly sympathetic to Radich’s cause. *Life* describes Radich as a “tall, slim, sensitive man who maintains both a Madison Avenue cool and a great interest in young, undiscovered artists,” endowing him with composure and a cosmopolitan eclecticism that belied the image of a crude anti-patriot adopted by his most vehement critics. To Grace Glueck of the *New York Times* he is “a soft-spoken, modest man of 44.” Both the *Life* article and *Art in America*’s piece “The Supreme Court and the Flag” focus on the legal ambiguity of the law. The *Life* piece provides numerous color photographs demonstrating how members of both the political Left and the Right use the flag in artistic and decorative fashion. However, as

Glueck writes in her piece, “Those who are arrested are invariably critics of national policy, while ‘patriots’ who tamper with the flag are overlooked.”\textsuperscript{134} The issue of artists’ appropriation of the flag “loomed in the public eye,” drawing public attention to the exhibit and putting weight on the outcome of the legal proceedings following it.\textsuperscript{135} The fact that Glueck and Kramer, both traditionally modernist critics, upheld the validity of Morrel’s artwork and defended it publicly shows how momentous the event had become. The case was more than an art matter. It involved people from many demographics, many viewpoints, many backgrounds, and raised public debate about the nature of art, freedom of expression, and the Vietnam War. Finally, it both forced previously reticent members of the art world to take a stance, albeit not usually an institutional one, and brought the discourse of anti-Vietnam art into a much wider audience than before.

The chaotic success of the Radich case led straight into the next flag controversy of the art world. “The People’s Flag Show” took over the Judson Memorial Church on November 9, 1970, and was what art critic and historian Lucy Lippard would call “the most exuberantly productive response to the war after Angry Arts Week.”\textsuperscript{136} Among the show’s organizers were art activists Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche, members of the Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG) who participated in the 1969 “Blood Bath” protest at MoMA. The organizers accepted all submissions to the exhibition after circulating flyers advertising the show, and put an announcement in the \textit{New York Times} requesting that “concerned artists and citizens” submit pieces

\textsuperscript{135} Bradford D. Martin, \textit{The Theater is in the Streets} (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 151.
\textsuperscript{136} Lucy R. Lippard, \textit{A Different War: Vietnam in Art} (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1990), 26.
that made use of the American flag in one way or another. All submissions were accepted without question, and although this opened up the show to aesthetic criticism, activist scholar Bradford Martin points out that this choice “democratized this opportunity to exhibit art, privileging antiwar politics above artistic technique and reputation.”

The week-long show deluged sensitive patriots with endless sources of outrage. After a sermon by Reverend Howard Moody titled “Symbols and Fetishes: a Left-Handed Salute to the Flag” and an inaugural flag-burning performed by members of GAAG, the show opened its doors to reveal a baked flag cake, a flag made out of soda pop cans, a flag in the shape of a penis labeled “Yankee Doodle Keep It Up”, a nude dance with flags as props, and most famously, KateMillett’s The American Dream Goes to Pot, a sculpture showing an American flag stuffed into the bowl of a toilet. “The People’s Flag Show” which aimed to test the limits of federal flag desecration laws, did just that. On the day before the show was set to close, the District Attorney’s office raided the Greenwich Village church, arrested the three organizers (Jon Hendricks, Jean Toche, and Faith Ringgold) on flag desecration charges, confiscated the phallic flag sculpture, and ordered that the show be shut down. Despite the D.A.’s orders, the show re-opened the following day. Although the “Judson Three” were found guilty of flag desecration, they “mobilized the courtroom as a forum for theatrical condemnations of the hypocrisy of mainstream American institutions.” Pointing out cancelled flag stamps on letters, the three

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137 Bradford D. Martin, The Theater is in the Streets (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press , 2004), 151.
138 Ibid.
activists argued: “Look what the U.S. Post Office does to our flag everyday!”\textsuperscript{139} The public, performative quality of this trial once again helped to draw outside audiences into the debate.

The strength of reactions towards the use of the American flag in political art demonstrates the success of the flag as a potent protest tool, and more generally, the success of political art that drew on symbols that held strong meanings for the American public. As Morrel himself said, “If it’s repressed, then it’s effective. You’ve made your statement.”\textsuperscript{140} The legal and administrative censorship that was enacted during the Radich case and “The People’s Flag Show” shows the depth of meaning the flag held for Americans, and also, going by Morrel’s definition, great successes for political art, where “art seemed a potent source of civil disorder.”\textsuperscript{141} But the Radich case and “The People’s Flag Show” became landmarks for more than purely legal reasons. They fall into the narratives of flag desecration legislation, as well as the wider protest movement against the Vietnam War. Additionally, the organizers of the exhibition drew on direct action strategies by acting in a way that forced law officials to take action. Direct and provocative confrontation with the opposition enhanced the theatricality of the situation, giving the arrested Judson Three a prankster appeal that appealed to audiences. The powerful use of the flag in these situations linked these protests to wider political efforts across the country,

\textsuperscript{139} Bradford D. Martin, \textit{The Theater is in the Streets} (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 152.
\textsuperscript{140} Jeanne Siegal, \textit{Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s} (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 105.
strengthening their impact and making them watershed moments in several different contexts.

The list of artists who make use of the flag in to protest Vietnam in their art goes on and on. Leon Golub’s *Napalm Flag* (1972) shows a shabbily painted flag with stains of dark paint smeared across it (Fig. 9). Nancy Spero’s “War Series” paintings of the same period make use of sketchily vague renditions of the Stars and Stripes juxtaposed with swastikas, bombs, and eagles. “Nowhere has the obscenity of the war been expressed with such unbridled vehemence and lyricism” wrote Lucy Lippard of Spero’s comparable collection, the “Bombs and Helicopters Series” (Fig. 10). Edward Kienholz’s 1968 multimedia installation *The Portable War Memorial* shows an array of popular and historic imagery (Fig. 11). While a couple sits off to

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one side of the tableau munching on hot dogs, at the center a group of soldiers patriotically hoists up the flag in a parody of the Iwo Jima statue in Arlington National Cemetery, while beside them a blackboard tallies the names of “extinct countries.”

Figure 10: Nancy Spero, *Female Bomb*, 1966.

Figure 11: Edward Kienholz, *The Portable War Memorial*, 1968.

143 Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 120.
Even Johns became overtly political in his use of the flag in his 1969 poster *Moratorium* (Fig. 12). The work falls in line with his other flags, but this one is painted in black, camouflage green, and orange—a specific combination that feeds its viewer red, white, and blue in the afterimage, and calls to mind the swamps and bogs of combat in a Vietnamese landscape. In the center of the painting is a white hole the size of a bullet. Johns may have been referencing a poem by Soviet poet Yevtushenko: “The stars/in your flag America/are like bullet holes.” These works, along with Morrel’s sculptures, the Radich case, and the People’s Flag Show, indicate how instrumental artistic efforts were in creating a space where the flag could be more than a flat symbol of unfaltering patriotism. These artists harnessed the evocative power of the flag as a symbol, while also adding a dimension of critique that although often highly controversial, led to a wider awareness of artists’ political efforts, and an expression of a more complex, critical patriotism.

![Image of Jasper Johns' Moratorium](image)

Figure 12: Jasper Johns, *Moratorium*, 1969.

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One artist who made use of mass media and American imagery particularly effectively was Peter Saul. Although he almost always falls into the Pop art category, his works were some of the strongest, most vocal denunciations against the war.

Davis McCarthy’s article “Dirty Freaks and High School Punks: Peter Saul’s Critique of the Vietnam War” attempts to restore Saul’s highly intense, violent tableaus to their place in the narrative of anti-Vietnam protest art. Drawing strongly from Pop art, Saul used cartoonish violence and dynamic images often painted in glo-paint to impact audiences. His paintings were shown widely, immune to the problem of minimal exposure that many political artists encountered, and provoked powerful audience responses. Saul’s use of mass media culture to shock complacent audiences out of their visual stupor proved one of the most effective uses of visual imagery in service of antiwar activism.

Figure 13: Peter Saul, Saigon, 1967.
“With cartoon and comic book-derived subjects engaged in “atrocious war games,” colors “at fever-pitch,” and various grotesqueries satirizing the “myths and mores of America,” Saul’s images seemed commensurate with the revealed horrors of the war” writes McCarthy.  

Saul’s most epic work was Saigon (1967) (Fig. 13). This behemoth of a painting shows cartoonish figures interacting, one barely distinguishable from the next. Meant to evoke the visual scene of Picasso’s Guernica, Saigon gives viewers the same sense of frantic chaos. However, unlike the masterpiece protesting the Spanish Civil War, Saul’s works is unabashedly violent and, according to Village Voice critic John Perrault, “make[s] Picasso’s “Guernica” look like an illustration for a Child’s Garden of Verses.”

The Vietnamese civilians, labeled “Innocent Virgin,” “Her Mother,” “Her Sister,” and “Her Father” are raped, beaten, strangled, bound, held at gunpoint, while the comic-book figures bend and twist so as to simultaneously serve the American soldiers Coke from a bottle, and serve as their sexual play toys.

Although violent, Saul’s works are strangely alluring, revealing to the viewer “his own fascination with death, sex, and violence, a fascination that when projected on a mass level inspires the horrors of war,” asserted Perrault’s review. Saul’s painting “emphatically registers the mid-1960s infatuation with violence not just through his selection of subject matter but also in his choice of palette.”

While stunning his viewers with unthinkable acts of violence, he also accosted them visually with neon color schemes and fluorescent glo-paint. Simultaneously, his use of

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familiar American imagery forbade the viewer from feigned detachment or incomprehension. The paintings were both revolting and utterly familiar to Saul’s audience. Saul’s art “knowingly turned U.S. culture, particularly postwar concerns about mass culture and wayward youth, against itself.”148 While “grounded formally in visual deformation, exaggeration, and/or simplification, caricature paradoxically fostered clarity of vision, with the aim of revealing the truth about individuals and circumstances.”149

Saul’s prominence as a Pop artist meant that his pieces were widely exhibited in galleries and exhibitions across the country, which is more than can be said for many works of protest art. His works were shown in solo exhibitions on both coasts, but he denied his viewers any of the guilt-free respite from politics and mass culture that galleries and museums often offered patrons.150 Saul used the oversaturated American visual culture to drive his point home: that what Americans were attracted to was extreme, shocking, and violent. A visitor to one of his exhibits reported that Saul’s works were “excellent in terms of producing a very strong horror emotional reaction […] this is what I think an art exhibit should do.” As Newsweek put it, Saul’s ambition was “to show people that what they want most to look at is not the kind of thing they will enjoy seeing.”151 Saul’s use of consumer symbols mixed with wartime violence, combined with the publicity and show space he procured, produced one of the most powerful collections of art in protest of the war.

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149 Ibid., 84.
150 Ibid., 88.
151 Ibid., 98.
Institution’s reluctance to support political art forced artists to develop new protest methods that challenged both institutional reticence in political matters, and American political apathy. The theatrical, public displays of outrage over the war came to be a hallmark of groups like the Art Workers’ Coalition, Artists and Writers Protest, Artists’ Protest Committee, and Guerrilla Art Action Group. Eye-catching protest methods that involved entire communities and neighborhoods, such as the Tower for Peace, Angry Arts Week, and “The People’s Flag Show” alerted diverse audiences to artists’ politicization, inviting them to take part in a dialogue that had previously been contained within the art world.

Simultaneously, artists adopted a visual rhetoric of striking symbolism that gave more conventionally displayed artworks a similar vitality. The flag became one of the most powerful symbols used in the art of protest. Along with other symbols of American identity, such as the eagles in Nancy Spero’s War Series, and images of popular culture, artists descended from the aesthetic high horse that had prevailed in the post-war years. The most effective antiwar art, in addition to being unsettling, was also accessible, putting visual and political connection ahead of aesthetic superiority. Finally, American attachment to the visual image that flourished in the years after World War II was not necessarily a barrier, as some artists like Ad Reinhardt might have thought. Rather, it created a common visual landscape filled with powerful tools and icons that artists could tap into, thus making their image all the more accessible, comprehensible, and appealing to the wider public. The art was in the streets and for the people, and was no longer a medium dependent on museums, galleries, or art critics for validation.
Chapter 3
The Poster: Identity and Consumerism in the New Left

“The poster, now acting as a political rather than an artistic vanguard, aspires to reach a broad audience, the more and the less educated, the professional intellectual and the factory worker alike; for the issues addressed, as well as the forms chosen, are broadly based.”152

-David Kunzle, Graphic Design in America

While fine artists made headlines with their extensive political festivals, performance based art, and vivid imagery, the New Left student movement was reviving a very different form of political art. The political poster flourished among students and activists, making its way into dorm rooms, offices, and other semi-public spaces where it served as both a form of self-expression and political dissent. Due to its affordable price and graphic vigor, the 1960s protest poster took on a faddish role, becoming a central mode of self-expression during the Vietnam War. The poster was crucial to creating a visual identity for the larger antiwar movement, and the lack of institutional structure around poster-making allowed for a much more fluid means of production and distribution than that of the art world. While museum artists made news through public protest events that mobilized neighborhoods and attracted media attention, the poster movement remained a relatively individualistic medium. It also stayed out of mainstream press coverage in the New York Times, Life, and other publications that usually commented on fine art’s political endeavors. Nevertheless, the coupling of the poster as a consumer item, and as a flexible, individualistic art

152 David Kunzle, "From the Poster of Protest to the Poster of Liberation," in Graphic Design in America, ed. Mildred Friedman and Phil Freshman (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1989), 181.
form made this medium intensely popular among the student activists most deeply involved in the antiwar movement, becoming the “major graphic expression of the peace movement and the new radicalism.”

The poster’s status as both a sought-after accessory in a consumerist culture and a visually powerful political statement empowered this medium to succeed where museum artists had fallen short: in intense appeal to a large, specific audience that adopted posters as the artistic expression of the movement as a whole. As a form of communication that primarily appeared in advertising or in the promotion of war efforts, historically the poster has been used to reach the largest demographic most efficiently. David Kunzle, a visual arts scholar who has done extensive work on the poster movement of the 1960s and 1970s, maintains that “the poster, now acting as a political rather than an artistic vanguard, aspires to reach a broad audience, the more and the less educated, the professional intellectual and the factory worker alike; for the issues addressed, as well as the forms chosen, are broadly based.” The poster protesting the Vietnam War offered a popular, easily acquired alternative to protest art of museums. The success of the poster demonstrates the popularity of art as a protest form. But only the wealthiest private collector can afford to express a political opinion by purchasing and displaying a work of fine art. The poster found its niche as a means of self expression for a demographic that had neither means nor interest to devote to a trip to the museum, much less a work of fine art.

154 David Kunzle, "From the Poster of Protest to the Poster of Liberation," in Graphic Design in America, ed. Mildred Friedman and Phil Freshman (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1989), 181.
Although fine art and poster art forms differ in many respects, the comparison between them is nonetheless a viable one. Poster and fine artists drew from one another’s work liberally during the 1960s, experimenting with the most successful aspects of the parallel style. Leading up to most heated years of antiwar protest in the 1960s and 1970s, poster artists drew from historical and topical trends in fine art, while fine artists forayed into the poster medium that was drawing increasing attention as a form of antiwar activism. Although artists’ experimentation with the poster form during the war years was met with varying degrees of success, the fact that fine artists experimented with the political poster form is an indication of poster’s vibrant political style, its status as a pop culture phenomenon, and its power as a form of protest.

The bonds between fine art and poster art reach back to the end of the nineteenth century, but the protest poster is a much older practice. Most graphic art scholars (most notably David Kunzle) date the advent of the political poster to the Protestant Reformation. Although Martin Luther used the form of a broadsheet, a print that was both larger in size and longer in text than the later protest posters, he has been hailed as the father of the political poster. “To minds attuned to the forms of twentieth century protest,” writes graphic historian Maurice Rickards, “the whole pattern of Luther’s career has a familiar look.” Several aspects of Luther’s form of dissent would make a comeback in the 1960s. The message of the broadsheet resonated deeply with the common people, while contrary to the voice of authority.

156 Maurice Rickards, Posters of Protest and Revolution (Bath, Somerset: Adams and Dart, 1970), 5.
What’s more, the broadsheet was also popular among sympathetic bourgeoisie, and thus appeared in many private home spaces, as well as public ones.

Posters re-emerged in the wake of Impressionism’s popularity. Art addressing everyday life had been accepted, most readily in France, and this acceptance welcomed the modern poster. “By the early 1900s,” writes Rickards, “[the poster] was an accepted idiom of communication. It had evolved its own visual grammar, its own production and distribution channels and its own role in the social scene.”

Artists like Toulouse-Lautrec melded commercialism and the commonplace visions of turn-of-the-century France, carving the poster a place in both art and advertising. Works like Alphonse Mucha’s 1898 advertisement for Job cigarettes had a subtle sensuality to them, which was emulative of the commercial rhetoric art-nouveau styles had already developed and mastered (Fig. 14). Additionally, the poster became an object of study and collection almost immediately, a trait shared with fine art of the time. “From the very beginning then,” writes Kunzle, “the commercial or semi-commercial poster has been viewed as a potential art object.”

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Luther hammered his first broadsheet to the door of Wittenberg Castle church in 1517, but to find the next major outburst of political posters we must look about 400 years later.\textsuperscript{160} Riding the wave of success enjoyed by commercial poster artists like Toulouse-Lautrec and Mucha, World War I governments quickly put this medium to use as propaganda. The poster turned political, encouraging conscription and support for warring nations. Posters generated during the Great War were notable for several reasons, the first being the sheer number of designs and copies produced.

In a time without radio and television, when newspapers were still read primarily by the upper-middle classes, the poster was an invaluable means of communication.\(^{161}\)

Governments were quick to put poster artists to work on propaganda. At the request of George Creel, the director of the Committee on Public Information, Charles Dana Gibson was chosen to head the Division of Pictorial Publicity, which would be in charge of producing designs for government agencies and patriotic organizations to spur involvement in the war effort. Walton Rawls, an expert on posters of the First World War, cites an explanation of the government’s decision:

> The billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye…What we wanted—what we had to have—were posters that represented the best work of the best artists—posters into which the masters of the pen and brush poured heart and soul as well as genius. Looking the field over, we decided upon Charles Dana Gibson as the man best suited to lead the army of artists.\(^{162}\)

The Division produced 700 designs overall, which it proposed to 58 separate government organizations promoting the war effort. Many artists donated their designs, a hefty contribution since many of them could sell a work for between $1,000 and $10,000. This action on the part of the American government was an innovative and effective use of artists to form public opinion.\(^{163}\)

Although they were rarely in direct opposition to governmental authority, new graphic designs established a rich iconography and rhetorical style that graphic artists of the 1960s would both utilize and parody. Military symbols, photography, and

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vilifying caricatures of the enemy were adopted by Vietnam-era artists in an ironic reversal of previously patriotic designs. The iconic “I Want You for the U.S. Army” graphic was designed by James Montgomery Flagg, a member of the Division of Pictorial Publicity, and reached production of over 4 million copies between 1917 and 1918. This poster would be endlessly satirized during the Vietnam War, turning its message of earnest patriotism into numerous antiwar polemics.164

Like fine artists, poster artists also benefited from government patronage during the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration frequently employed poster artists, and by the start of the Second World War, more than 5,000 poster designs had been issued. The 1930s produced such graphic design giants as Ben Shahn. Known for his populist work during the depression, Shahn would continue to make socially concerned designs throughout the Vietnam War.

While World War II witnessed no poster campaign comparable to that of World War I, posters remained a significant part of mass culture. Once again, posters urging men’s conscription and women’s support of the war at home were visible throughout the country. Rosie the Riveter was plastered on walls, and Flagg’s “I Want You” poster was reissued. Graphic design during the Second World War, although not particularly impressive in numbers, established a fascinating trend that would also be incorporated into posters protesting the Vietnam War: By 1939, posters had come to play a critical role in elections. Richard Hollis, an expert on graphic design, describes how leaders’ faces became symbols in themselves:

Like the black moustache, bowler hat and walking stick of the screen comedian Charlie Chaplin, the distinct personal images of political leaders were translated into two dimensions. The figures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin embodied the power and ideology of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Soviet Russia. Names were replaced by titles, like the names of consumer products: Hitler and Mussolini became known as ‘the leader, Der Führer, and Il Duce.’

During the Vietnam War, this practice returned, albeit slightly altered. Rather than using the portraiture described above to show support for their government, poster artists of the 1960s twisted this practice to cast American leaders in a highly critical light. The inspiring, iconic images of Hitler and Mussolini’s faces gave way to unflattering caricatures of LBJ and Nixon, satirizing their political maneuverings in Vietnam.

Travel posters, advertisements, and remakes of the “old masters” dominated the poster scene in the 1950s. The rise of advertising and the dominance of consumer culture resulted in a poster scene that was largely commercial. The McCarthy witch-hunts made most voices on the Left more cautious, and the majority of graphic talent was focused on advertising. Despite the silence of leftist voices, this decade did its part in shaping the protest poster of the 1960s, resulting in “a much more conceptual and less stereotypical way of making political statements which was a major break with the past,” as poster scholar Victor Margolin writes.

With the explosion of 1960s youth culture, however, the poster became both a form of self-expression and a consumer item. David Kunzle’s work *Posters of...*

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Protest: The Posters of Political Satire in the U.S. 1966-1970 follows this development closely. This source is a curious blend of academic analysis and primary document. Written in 1970 towards the beginning of Kunzle’s career and in the midst of the poster craze, Kunzle’s analysis is both a critical examination of the causes of such a popular phenomenon, and a personal reaction to it. Because the poster renaissance had not yet concluded, a fully developed analysis of the art form’s popularity was not possible, and Kunzle makes tentative critical assertions, while acknowledging the impossibility of arriving at any sort of conclusion. However, the analysis he provides is certainly valuable, as he would become the primary scholar on this particular era of graphic design history. His vivid, first-hand description of the beginnings of the poster movement is also valuable. Therefore, Kunzle’s work will be treated as both a critical and an observational document.

The poster movement sprang out of the 1950s in conjunction with the burgeoning youth culture. Kunzle remarks, “the student, who in the fifties decorated his wall with a bullfight poster or a print after Rembrandt, is now putting up psychedelic and political posters, leaving the bullfighter to Mexican restaurants and the Rembrandt to his grandmother’s sitting room.”168 Rock bands drew hoards to concert halls, where posters would be available, often for free, to complement album sales. “Rather small, but jazzy in design and color” these graphics were distributed by major music venues or posted in shop windows to grab the attention of passersby.169 Originating in the San Francisco Bay Area, these posters were often as sought after as

169 Ibid.
the albums themselves, becoming collector’s items and signifiers of personal musical
taste.\(^{170}\) The excitement these rock posters generated was a precursor to the political
poster rage that would arise in the following years.

The escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965-1966 signaled the beginning of
widespread antiwar protest, as well as the beginning of the massive political poster
boom. Posters, writes Lippard, “name cultural identities and political positions
disbarred elsewhere.”\(^{171}\) At this early stage of the poster renaissance, those vocally
opposing the war were still a minority, and focused their energy on alternative ways
of transmitting their views that didn’t rely on traditional mainstream media outlets.
The assimilation of posters into the countercultural was in many ways an
uncomplicated one, for posters were a highly individualistic art form that didn’t rely
on institutional support or extensive funding.

While the first posters had tended to place the war in a domestic framework
by protesting politicians, conscription, and blind patriotism, the Tet Offensive in 1968
pushed their concern farther abroad. The Tet Offensive provoked some of the most
inventive poster designs, which centered on the combat in Vietnam itself, and
denounced America’s motives and battle tactics with vehemence and sharp, cutting
visuals.\(^{172}\) Posters like Ben Shahn’s harmonious political endorsement “McCarthy.
Peace” (1967) (Fig. 15) gave way to the likes of Nordahl’s 1968 work simply titled
“Vietnam” (Fig. 16). The latter work presents Lyndon Johnson’s foreign policy as a


\(^{171}\) Lucy R. Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press,
1990), 27.

\(^{172}\) David Crowley, “The Propaganda Poster,” in *The Power of the Poster* (London: V&A
Publications, 1998), 137.
sort of sick entertainment for Americans, depicting the war as a movie poster. The background of the poster shows photographs of naked Vietnamese children running in terror and dead bodies, while in the foreground Johnson reclines in a lawn chair, taking in the wreckage of the war. At the foot of the page, lettering sarcastically boasts “filmed in real blood and guts color...price of admission: your son and taxes.” At this point, the poster craze was gaining momentum quickly, and by the time Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, the poster craze was at full blast. 173

Figure 15: Ben Shahn, *McCarthy. Peace*, 1967.

Part of what made the poster such a powerful means of protest was its incorporation into the hippie activist aesthetic. Far from being just an expression of dissent, the poster was both a form of self-expression, and a way of identifying with a larger group: “students, radical junior faculty and that large, amorphous and notorious
Like long hair, flower power clothes, marijuana, and sexual freedom, a political graphic in a dorm room was a key way of identifying with this particular social-political demographic. Furthermore, posters seemed to provide a unique link between activism and other facets of leftist culture. A poster depicting an antiwar artist or musician could be just as effective a protest statement as one overtly referencing politics. Bob Dylan prompted works like Milton Glaser’s 1966 poster “Dylan” (Fig. 17). With psychedelic spirals of hair framing his visage, Dylan’s poster portrait immediately brings to mind the peace and love mantra of his fan base. Likewise, John Lennon was very open about his political inclinations, both within his music—the most obvious example is his 1971 single “Imagine”—and outwardly, when in 1969 he and Yoko Ono staged a “love-in” during which they had themselves photographed naked in bed as a protest for peace. Even the cover art of their 1968 album “Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins” became a political statement. The front of the album pictured Lennon and Yoko naked, innocent, and proud, which in itself was enough to draw a starkly unflattering contrast to the appearance-based consumer culture and the war such a culture tolerated.

In 1968, the graphic design periodical *Graphis* described demand for posters as “half way between a passing fashion and a form of mass hysteria.” Kunzle argues that their commercial status “diluted” the power of political posters, and in a sense, he may be correct. When the political poster became a stock item, surely its appeal as an underground artistic phenomenon disappeared. However, it seems that in fact posters’ widespread consumer appeal is what made them so effective. In the introduction to *Graphic Design in America*, Mildred Friedman quotes critic Adrian Forty: “No design forks unless it embodies ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended.” In other words, the common political

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beliefs held by activists were essential to the widespread implementation of the poster as a tool of the protest movement.

In keeping with a trend of capitalizing on dissent, poster businesses caught on to this developing aesthetic. In 1966, poster stores were extremely limited. An activist looking to buy a political print would have headed for a radical bookstore, or a leftist print shop. By 1970, however, the poster market had risen to an entirely new commercial level. Poster megastores had sprouted up in every major city. Ever-changing displays of hundreds of posters filled warehouse-sized venues. Kunzle describes the scene:

> Posters are suspended, like clothes in a dress store, in serried rows from wall racks, and they are fixed onto screens which turn on a central axis like the pages of some enormous medieval picture book: the eye is swing around as on a carousel…the poster store tends to offer a total visual environment composed of entirely one commodity.

Political posters constituted a large part of this commercial atmosphere. They were also available at large bookstores in any major city, as well as on most college campuses. A poster was usually priced somewhere between 50 cents and $2.50, depending on coloring and size. Someone seeking to acquire one of these prints never had to go far or pay much, and purchasing a poster was a viable action for most students and young professors, whereas investing in a work of fine art wasn’t. It is notable, however, that the poster was not relegated to the rank of a basic accessory. While its availability did much for its success as an object of protest, it “is not thrown

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180 Ibid., 36, see footnote 2.
at the public, virtually for free, like the newspaper or magazine cartoon,” writes Kunzle. “It must be sought out, and its purchase represents an act of faith as well as a financial sacrifice.” The acquisition of a poster was a pointed, intentional act, which gave it weight as both a personal statement and a political one.

Just as poster designers used advertising rhetoric—the arresting graphic juxtaposed with blunt, striking lettering—so did distributors employ classic capitalistic strategies to attract buyers. Kunzle writes one business venture carried out by a poster production company called Gross National Product (GNP). This company gave students all the materials they needed to establish a “mini-dealership” on campus, which, writes Kunzle, “transmits the illusion that one is part of an international network of subversives working on the scale of IBM.” Cartoonist Ron Cobb, a staff cartoonist at the *Los Angeles Free Press*, published his political cartoons as a limited edition set of signed “art posters.” Priced at $100 for the set, or roughly $5 per print, the works were about twice as much as a black and white poster, but considerably less than a signed lithograph by a reputable artist. Targeting a customer more wealthy than the average college student, but not so affluent as to afford a work of high art, Cobb challenged his audience with the ironic lines: “Have you been accused of being UNAMERICAN? Redeem yourself, spend money like the Establishment.”

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The most successful use of advertising techniques to promote antiwar posters came from the mind of Ira Nerken, a 20-year-old political science major at Yale. Nerken headed the Committee to Unsell the War, a campaign which brought the advertising industry into the antiwar movement, and through this exposure significantly expanded presence of the antiwar movement in the public eye. This effort was largely dependent on poster artists, and produced one of the most famous
antiwar posters of the era, the “I Want Out” design that parodied the iconic “I Want You for the U.S. Army” poster from World War I (Fig. 18). On 23 February, 1971, CBS aired “The Selling of the Pentagon,” a special documentary produced by Peter Davis, that criticized the government’s use of taxpayer dollars to promote military action in Vietnam by way of television commercials and print advertisements. The program pointed out how government advertising “marketed a specific interpretation of the Vietnam War and the cold war to the U.S. public” and “questioned the impact on a democratic society and free press of a vast military information system that portrayed violence as glamorous, advertised expensive weapons like cars, and presented biased opinion as fact.”

Struck by this approach, Nerken posited that if it was possible to sell the war in Vietnam to American citizens, it might also be possible to “unsell” it.

With help from Yale faculty and other contacts, Nerken got in touch with major figures in the advertising business, rallying the agencies with “posters with drawings of the Pentagon and the headline ’Help unsell the war’” accompanied by letters asking for “thoughtful and honest advertising, created by people who love their country.” The campaign grew rapidly, ultimately involving over three hundred artists, writers, directors, and producers from almost fifty advertising agencies. These participants contributed 125 print ads, 33 television commercials, and 31 radio spots. The “I Want Out” poster was among the most widely distributed print ads, showing a bedraggled Uncle Sam figure with his hand outstretched in a desperate, pleading

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gesture, his head bleeding and bandaged, his coat torn, and his star-spangled hat under his arm in a pose of resignation. As the campaign grew, funding and resources could not keep pace. In September of 1971 the campaign was turned over to the leadership of Carl Rogers, a staff member of the country’s largest religiously oriented antiwar organization, Clergy and Laymen Concerned. A deciding factor in this change in leadership was the Uncle Sam poster. When it ran in Time’s story in July of that year, thousands of readers wrote to the magazine requesting a copy of the poster. Unsell was unable to meet such a large demand for the poster, which solidified Nerken’s decision to turn over the organization to Rogers. Nevertheless, the flood of requests shows the scale of demand for graphic designs opposing the war. To this day, the “I Want Out” poster remains a landmark in graphic design history as an example of a poster that enjoyed quantifiable success in reaching large audiences. Nerken dispelled Kunzle’s lamentation that “the street art of today is monopolized by the advertisers and the designers of highway signs” by taking these very tools and putting them in the service of social responsibility and political transparency.

Unsell posters received media attention in numerous publications, the highpoint of which was perhaps Hugh Hefner’s donation of an entire page of a Playboy issue—worth $39,000—to an Unsell ad. Meanwhile, “I Want Out”

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187 Ibid., The Time article in question is “Unselling the War,” Time, June 21, 1971.
addressed Americans from billboards all across the country. Poster artists’ willingness to collaborate with advertising organizations and other forms of mass media worked to their advantage in this case. Such collaboration on the part of fine artists was unlikely at best, for the high art world tended to keep its distance from such commercial forms of success. Although media attention was certainly favorable for fine artists in the form of a positive review or a profile in a major magazine, the kind of mass exposure and distribution that made the “I Want Out” poster so successful would have been contrary to notions of fine art as unique, irreproducible, and exempt from common, widespread capitalistic impulses.

While it may seem dubious that an art form as commercial as the “I Want Out” poster suggests would be compatible with the student movement, aspects of the poster community mirrored New Left values such as cooperation, accessibility, and a devaluation of material objects. The poster of protest is “as short-lived as the hippie flower,” declared Manuel Gasser, writer for *Graphis*, in 1968. “The abandonment of the concept of permanence in art comes out more clearly in the new cult of the pseudo-poster [pseudo because not selling anything] than in any other field of artistic endeavour.”\(^{191}\) The protest poster was printed on sheets of inexpensive, ultra thin paper, or sheets of printer paper. The primary method of printing, silkscreening, was also the least expensive, making prints both extremely affordable, and equally disposable.\(^{192}\) Geared toward obsolescence, many posters drew their political punch from their spontaneity and fleeting applicability. One graphic released by the

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Committee to Unsell the War demanded bringing all American troops home from Vietnam by December 31, 1971. Clearly, after this date passed the poster was outdated and had lost its political impact. But with the constant stream of disturbing news from abroad and at home, artists were never at a loss for material. Posters’ hyper-timeliness and disposability added to their persuasive power, while keeping them in favor with their anti-capitalistic audience.

Interestingly, there were movements in the art world that operated along the same lines. Process art, Performance art, Earthworks, and Conceptual art all decried exaltation of the “art object.” Many artists—such as Walter de Maria who exhibited a room full of dirt, or Robert Morris who insisted his sculpture made of steam was a legitimate artwork—began creating works that were meant to be unsellable and transient. But these usually took the form of satirical critiques of artistic norms and the consumerist culture that upheld them.\(^\text{193}\) A contradiction arose in the art world between being political against consumerism, and being political against the war. While the goal of artists protesting capitalism was to mock collectors by creating something completely free from commoditization, artists against the Vietnam War tended to focus on popularizing their message and democratizing their work to create a pervasive political message. The methods employed by these two groups seemed irreconcilable, and these political agendas rarely overlapped within the art world.

Another aspect of the poster movement that fell in with leftist principles was its potential to offer artistic individuality while also being part of a larger supportive community. The antiwar ethic encouraged individual action, while also drawing from

the power of a wider network of likeminded people. “Counterculture’s commitment to direct action and a conception of personal political responsibility led to the establishment of various poster workshops,” writes scholar David Crowley.\textsuperscript{194} It was possible for anyone to take up the role of poster artist, within limits. And indeed, Kunzle verifies this view, writing “the political poster, then, is the work of a very high percentage of non-specialist artists and publishers.”\textsuperscript{195} Marketing and distribution channels were equally fluid, and a common occurrence was “individuals going around the poster stores, like the street hawker of old, with a bundle of posters under arm; if the store manager likes the design, or thinks it will sell, he will buy copies at 50 per cent, and may never see or be able to contact the artist-salesman again.”\textsuperscript{196} The work of a poster artist was open to almost anyone, for it required almost no institutional or commercial backing. What’s more, the handmade, unfinished aesthetic many posters exhibited necessitated minimal artistic training. Artists could fall in and out of the market as they pleased, designing when they felt compelled to.

There was also a great deal of design borrowing from artist to artist. “Despite the ubiquitous ©, there is little respect for copyright law; neither artists nor publishers expect protection,” observes Kunzle.\textsuperscript{197} This fact gave graphic artists access to a much larger body of designs from which to pull inspiration. Design was not an introspective experience, but a visual communication with other artists and their

\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{197} \textit{Ibid.}
graphics. Likewise, Kunzle’s wording implies a no holds barred policy in terms of
distribution. Once released, a graphic could be reinvented in numerous different
stages, each artist making his or her own additions or modifications. The lack of
enforcement regarding copyright law made the market into a free flow of visual
information, creating a communal, cooperative quality among artists that was present
to a much lesser degree in the present fine art community. However, this exchange of
designs did not interfere with the artists’ sense of taking on an individualistic artistic
endeavor.

Occasionally, graphic artists came together to form coalitions. A sprinkling of
art collectives and student workshops was born, in similar fashion to groups like the
Art Workers’ Coalition, Artists and Writers Protest, and the Artists’ Protest
Committee. The most famous example of this sort of collectivity is the month-long
strike by the staff and students of the Student Strike Workshop in Boston.\textsuperscript{198} Another
is the consortium Group Commentary that formed with the goal of producing political
prints that were both cheap ($1.50) and high quality art.\textsuperscript{199} For the most part though,
design artists tended to avoid larger organization. The fluid system of production and
distribution allowed artists from diverse backgrounds the freedom to create their own
designs, while also participating in the joint political venture of a large, amorphous
group of likeminded people that offered inspiration and support.

Although there was a great deal of interplay between the fine arts and poster
art, the modernist art theory that dominated in the years after World War II made it

\textsuperscript{198} Liz McQuiston, \textit{Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics since the Sixties}
\textsuperscript{199} David Kunzle, \textit{Posters of Protest: The Posters of Political Satire in the U.S. 1966-1970}
difficult for fine artists to involve themselves directly in the poster medium. Graphic design has often been regarded among art connoisseurs as an inferior form, largely because the poster’s aim of political or commercial persuasion, education, or incitation had been viewed as incompatible with pure aesthetics until the 1960s. But the division between the two modes of expression is somewhat artificial. Poster artists have often emulated fine art, and vice versa. Curiously, as Dawn Ades notes, “whereas in its early days the poster aspired to the status of art, in the twentieth century pictorial art has often aspired to the condition of the poster.”

Roy Lichtenstein’s 1963 exhibition poster “Crak! Now, Mes Petits…Pour La France!” is an example of high art’s fascination with the poster medium without full adoption of it. Although the piece takes the form of a poster, it was designed to remain within the gallery, and was displayed as a work of fine art.

Until the 1960s, fine artists had dabbled in the poster form without fully embracing it. While their work would emanate poster culture and style, in most cases it would remain, like Lichtenstein’s, within a gallery or museum setting. Even during the Vietnam War, Pop artists’ ventures into the poster world usually took the form of expensive limited editions. Mass production and inexpensive printings were eschewed by an art world attached to its medium’s distance from mass culture, and the division between poster art and fine art was often seen as one of class.

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The 1960s mark a distinctive break in this trend. Political artists, seeing the success of the poster in achieving wide distribution and appeal, branched out into the parallel medium, albeit with mixed success. Jasper Johns’ “Moratorium” poster was a particularly admired antiwar gesture in the fine art community, but for unclear reasons it didn’t receive much press.\(^2\) The most successful meeting of poster art and fine art was by far the Art Workers Coalition’s *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* poster, which succeeded in shedding its elevated origins to become a highly successful political venture within the art world and without. Although it took the form of a protest poster, the work was created by a group comprised almost exclusively of fine artists. The aim of the poster was to “cut across both high-art expectations, institutionally and practically, and those of the ‘mass media.’”\(^3\)

Irving Petlin, Jon Hendricks, and Fraser Dougherty were primarily responsible for the assembly and organization of the *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* poster. But officially, the work was issued with no artists’ names attached to it, a very deliberate and calculated choice. The creators were set on keeping the poster strictly “non artistic.” They worried that attributing the poster to a particular artist or artists would emphasize the poster’s high art origins, endowing it with value in the art world, while making it less accessible to the public they were addressing. Similarly, the use of a photograph rather than an original graphic was meant to detract attention from the poster as a work of art, rather framing it as a universal statement against the


atrocity. The fact that there were so few images of My Lai in the art world added to its shock value, and made it all the more ground-breaking in the world of political art.

Although MoMA withdrew its support of the project midway through production as explained in the first chapter, the poster branch of the AWC nonetheless reached their goal of distributing 50,000 copies by enlisting the help of informal art communities, students, and members of the larger antiwar movement located throughout the country. The poster was distributed in the streets for free, bringing the protest to street level and making sure its visibility didn’t rely on people entering museums or galleries. On the day of its release, about 100 volunteers went to the loading bay to break up the 50,000 posters into smaller packages that would travel all across the country. As Petlin remembers, “people carried them under their arm to California…they appeared in rallies in Berkeley a few days later. It was posted all over the New York subway system almost the day after it was printed. It was like a blitz. The New York Post had a photo of subway workers tearing it down.” The poster, which appeared in demonstrations and newspapers for years after its December 1969 release, was reissued during the 1972 elections with the caption “Four More Years?”

207 Ibid., 28.
The success of this undertaking prompted similar actions by fine artists in following years. *The Collage of Indignation II* proved less successful, however, exhibiting the potentially detrimental effects of the art world’s elitist mystique. Prompted by the success of the poster art form, Lucy Lippard and Rob Wolin commissioned 100 poster designs from a diverse group of high artists that comprised a second *Collage of Indignation*. The works were shown in several venues, the idea being that after the initial sale of a design the money would be used to print cheap copies of an increasing number of the works, with subsequent proceeds going to the Peace Action Coalition and Student Mobilization. However, the process turned out to be too costly, since only one of the designs sold at all. The graphic was Rauschenberg’s, which attempted to “bring the war home to the print’s buyers by leaving a blank square in the center, into which he asked people to paste a current headline or news clipping about the war, transforming each print into a unique and personal work.”

Sadly, his plan backfired, for his customers were either too reluctant to damage a valuable art object by defacing it with newspaper headlines, or were too intimidated to “collaborate” with such a renowned artist. The result was, of course, that the work lost its meaning altogether.

These actions demonstrate several key points. Firstly, they return to the claim of the first chapter: Artists had a great deal of trouble breaking out of established practices and institutions that dominated the world of fine art. The AWC’s poster is one example of successful evasion of institutional control. We also see that the AWC’s decision to publish the poster anonymously was a prescient and likely highly

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beneficial choice. In light of customer’s reluctance to “bring the war home” by making Rauschenberg’s poster their own, the potentially detrimental effect of high art’s elitism is evident.

For the most part, posters of the twentieth century had served either governmental or commercial ends. The poster of protest in the 1960s broke this trend. Using the techniques accumulated from decades of advertisements for consumer products and war support, poster artists entered the visual combat of Vietnam-era America armed with plentiful weapons. Their increasing status as both a form of self expression and a consumer item gave them widespread success and visibility within the New Left movement. In spite of this commercial aspect, their encapsulation of leftist values of cooperation, direct action, and individual political responsibility granted them free entry into the “hippie” world, rendering them the preferred form of visual protest among student activists. In comparing fine art and poster art, perhaps the most striking difference is that in accessibility and institutional control. While decades of tradition, art theory, and museum practices followed politicized fine artists into the arena of antiwar protest—holding it back and clinging to art as an exclusive club open to those with intellect, money, and good taste—the poster movement was a fresh, innovative, spontaneous phenomenon that welcomed interested activists and artists with open arms. The poster was cheap, plentiful, readily accessible, utterly timely, and visually captivating: in short, making the medium a huge success within the world of the student activist, and strengthening the movement’s identity both politically and emotionally. This intense appeal to the primary demographic of the antiwar movement, combined with innovative advertising techniques and strikingly
original visuals made poster art a vitally important contribution to the antiwar movement.
Epilogue

Martha Rosler’s *Bringing the War Home:*
The Iraq War, and a Legacy

When Martha Rosler started collaging her series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* it was never intended to be shown in any art venue. Rather, she dispersed the images through underground, independent channels, meaning them to be reproduced and passed around at antiwar rallies in New York and California, where Rosler lived for much of her youth.\(^{212}\) The late-1960s found Rosler living in New York City as a young “artist-writer-activist” and it was this landscape that inspired her borderline obsession with photocollage.\(^{213}\) Her career path, the themes of her work, and her return to artistic antiwar activism during the Iraq War trace a narrative that identifies the lasting effects of political art during the Vietnam War, and raises new questions about the role of political art in today’s world.

*Bringing the War Home* combines commercial advertisements and Vietnam horror, as soldiers, bodies, and faceless children threaten the opulence, elegance, and artificiality of post-war homes. A Vietnamese peasant carries a naked, lifeless infant up a high modernist staircase. A *Playboy* cutout looks out at the camera from the midst of American soldiers in action. Crouching military figures invade a spotless kitchen. An oblivious housewife merrily cleans drapes as men shoot at each other outside. Rosler’s work is one of conflicting spaces and conflicting mindsets. While Vietnam combat and suburban American life vie for space on the page, the

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superficiality of gender roles, consumer culture, and media images streaming through American TV prove utterly incompatible with one another (Fig. 19).

Figure 19: Martha Rosler, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, c. 1970.

As the antiwar movement was on the decline, Rosler began to experiment with other mediums and subject matter, and her art also gained repute as she began to show it in galleries in Southern California where she moved in 1968. Her work protesting the Vietnam War soon gave way to more strictly feminist art. Pursuing a more multimedia approach, she critiqued the monotonity of women’s roles with works like her 1975 video *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in which Rosler imbues various cooking utensils with an underlying violence that challenges women’s compliance with
traditional gender roles. Martha Rosler was now on her way to becoming “one of the most intelligent advocates of feminist-socialist-postmodernist ‘critical art.’”

Over three decades later, Rosler returned to her antiwar collages. *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* had been shown in no more than a sprinkling of galleries until 2004, but suddenly demand for Rosler’s works rose significantly, and her works were featured in numerous exhibitions that sought to draw parallels between Vietnam Era foreign policy and Bush’s contemporary intervention abroad. Perhaps the most successful show in terms of media coverage was called “Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War” which featured Vietnam Era works of both Rosler and Nancy Spero, as well as new series both artists had developed in response to the Iraq War. Reviewed by *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter, Rosler’s reactions to the Vietnam War were displayed alongside a new set of photomontages “with 21st-century homes invaded by phantoms from Iraq.” Rosler created the second series during the 2004 presidential election, a time when the visual arts were making a comeback in challenging governmental actions.

Her new collages were in many ways exceedingly similar to the series that preceded them. They show scenes of extreme commercialism and extreme violence, both contrasting and colliding. Mutilated Vietnamese are replaced with street scenes of Baghdad in flames and frightened women in burkas. The piece *Red and White Stripes (Baghdad Burning)* (Fig. 20) shows a strikingly sexy woman in mid-step as if on a fashion runway. She walks straight towards the viewer with a cold gaze fixed on

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the camera, as behind her, through the red and white striped drapes on the windows, we see a city consumed by a firestorm. In this particular piece, Rosler makes the parallel between Iraq and Vietnam explicit. On the couches in the well-groomed living room are strewn images, one of them the photograph used in the AWC’s *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* poster protesting the My Lai massacre.

![Figure 20: Martha Rosler, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, 2004.](image)

Although the two series are separated by more than three decades, Rosler has made only subtle shifts to keep the works relevant. However, she anticipates this criticism, stating that “I thought that actually was a plus, because I wanted to make the point that with all the differences, this is exactly the same scenario. We haven’t
advanced at all in the way we go to war."\(^{216}\) Since these exhibitions, Rosler has continued to protest the Iraq War through various methods, from gallery shows to antiwar billboards to online databases for her followers.\(^{217}\)

The trajectory of Rosler’s career highlights several important points about antiwar art of the Vietnam Era. Firstly, it shows us an alternate ending to the prevailing account of protest art against the Vietnam War that holds that political art was largely inconsequential in the antiwar movement, and that its lasting import is negligible. Rosler’s continued artistic involvement in antiwar activism brings out the lasting contributions of artists’ activist groups and political art to this activism. Some scholars point out the increasing hopelessness of the antiwar cause. Reports of atrocities continued to haunt television screens and newspapers, the war continued to escalate, the New Left disintegrated, and certain elements of protest culture became more and more violent. It seemed to many artists that the costs of pursuing the antiwar cause greatly outweighed the benefits. Additionally, internal tensions within the AWC made decision making increasingly difficult. A stake in museum and gallery culture and the freedom to pursue more fruitful goals struck artists as a more valuable asset than making art for a seemingly hopeless cause, and political artists, in Lippard’s words, “were all too happy to turn their back on it.”\(^{218}\)

However, scholars including Bradford Martin, Francis Frascina, and Lucy Lippard hold that the influence of political art by no means ended with the movement. Rather, as Martin explains:

\(^{217}\) *Ibid*.
Those who minimize the protest culture’s legacy contend that it imploded under the weight of its own rhetoric, but they do so only by ignoring the impact on political awareness by women’s liberationists, black activists, and gay rights advocates among others, who continued to struggle for social change in the seventies and beyond.219

The feminist movement used powerful graphic strategies that were popularized during the Vietnam War, such as the use of icons to create such monumental designs as a fist circumscribed by the female symbol ♀. What’s more, many of the artists involved in the AWC and other groups would go on to become important in the feminist movement. During the antiwar movement, women realized they too were among the repressed, and “this revelation of powerlessness led to the gender polarization of the art Left when, in 1969, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) and, in 1970, the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee were formed from the ribs of the AWC.”220 Strategies and outlooks were carried over to the feminist movement, which would replace antiwar activism as “the most powerful polemical and political force in the art world.”221 Artists like Faith Wilding, Elenor Antin, and Hannah Wilke used the feminist saying “the personal is political” to create performance pieces reminiscent of GAAG demonstrations.222 From these examples it is clear that the artistic boundaries antiwar art pushed did not simply regress to their pre-Vietnam state. The notion that art could constitute a political category, and that politics could constitute an artistic one, informed following political movements that drew on

219 Bradford D. Martin, The Theater is in the Streets (Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 159.
220 Lucy R. Lippard, A Different War: Vietnam in Art (Seattle, WA: The Real Comet Press, 1990), 42.
221 Irving Sandler, Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s (New York, NY: IconEditions, 1996), 114.
Vietnam-era artistic practice for inspiration. In the same way that the antiwar movement used art and imagery to make visibly the costs of war, feminist and gay rights movements would later use similar graphic strategies to make their own causes visible and prominent to the public eye.

But protest art’s legacy extends beyond the feminist movement, and into the present. A look at several *New York Times* articles around the time of the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) held in New York show that Rosler’s works were not the only political ones to be rediscovered during the Iraq War, and provide a case study of contemporary political art.223 These articles identify and confront many of the same issues: distribution, accessibility, a simultaneous poster art culture, institutional museum, gallery, and criticism politics, and a concern about the aesthetic quality of dissenting art. One 2005 *Times* article noticed that both artistically and politically, “there’s a faint glow of historical consciousness-raising on the horizon” and “Americans, heavy sleepers that they are, are waking up to the news that 2005 is looking a lot like 1965.”224 The resurgence of political art in 2004 reveals the myriad of unresolved political and artistic issues that have their roots in Vietnam Era activism.

The RNC held in New York City hit a sensitive spot for artists, for the upsurge of political art retrospectives and new political art took the city by a storm.

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The list of political art events targeting President Bush, American involvement in Iraq, and the G.O.P is lengthy and diverse. A show at the Freedom Salon included works by Leon Golub, Martha Rosler, Yoko Ono, and other famous names from the 1960s. Nancy Spero’s *War Series* found a receptive audience at the Galerie Lelong in Chelsea, reviewed as “a passionate, mordant, self-consciously moral art” that “is as powerful and pertinent today as it was nearly 40 years ago.”

In addition to low-budget gallery shows organized at the last minute by freelance curators, some of the larger art institutions, in stark contrast to Vietnam-era art culture, showed a tolerance of and even mild support for political work. The Whitney Museum of American Art held several art exhibitions explicitly comparing the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, and *Artforum*, still New York’s leading art journal, laid aside its plans for the September issue, instead publishing a portfolio of political works commissioned from 14 dissenting artists.

In keeping with the 2004 rebirth of Vietnam Era protest art, graphic design also constituted a large part of the political works being produced. The Republican National Convention took place from August 30 to September 2 at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, and the banners flying around the venue blasted the slogan of the convention at passersby: “Make Nice.” But during those dates, the streets of Manhattan were plastered with political graphics with a different message in the form of “graphically brazen, un-nice-making posters protesting Republican administration policies.” The *New York Times* confirmed “this is a big year for protest graphics, one

of the oldest art forms in the United States and one that is booming thanks in part to
the Internet, which makes distributing the images easy and cheap.”227 Young
designers formed collectives such as the No RNC Poster Project, which strengthened
their network of resources and their political message. In August of 2004, just before
the convention took place in New York City, the No RNC collective had distributed
some 50,000 posters in 19 designs chosen from the submissions of 150 graphic design
artists. These posters were distributed online, a technology that since its inception
makes it easy and inexpensive to download and print graphics. The Internet “makes
these images national and not just a New York thing,” said a young poster artist
quoted in the New York Times.228

But poster artists did not abandon their old distribution techniques of the
1960s. Many political graphics were handed out at independent bookstores, and on
occasion artists donated posters to political causes like a leftist fund-raiser that took
place in a Manhattan office in August, where the donated graphics were sold for $5 to
$30 apiece.229 Neither did artists forget the rhetorical strategies that both fine artists
and poster artists made use of decades before. One poster showed Bush with a
Pinocchio nose, another an elephant consuming cash on one end and excreting bombs
on the other. Conceptual art in the vein of Hans Haacke’s museum polls also re-
emerged, the technology updated to produce, among other works, a “savvy, satirical
digital mediarama in a 57th Street gallery, which includes its own cast of political
candidates and cabinet members and brings together the efforts of numerous artists

227 Phil Patton, "Design Notebook; For Graphic Artists, Back to the Barricades,” New York
Times, August 2004.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.
and artists’ collectives." The show was put together by The Experimental Party, a political art group that has become a sort of umbrella organization linking the works and activities of numerous artists and art collectives. In special preparation for the convention, the show has adopted the motto “10,000 Acts of Artistic Mediation.”

The week of the convention seems to have taken on the feel of a second “Angry Arts Week” as the title of one New York Times article appearing that week suggests: “Caution: Angry Artists at Work.”

As artists took up their old tools in challenging the American government, some of the previous problems emerged. First, the question of how to reach a wider audience was always present. As during the Peace Tower and GAAG protests, public space became an important tool for poster artists in particular. Although putting up posters constituted a mild form of civil disobedience, protest graphics found their way onto walls, shop windows, and were even slipped over the frames reserved for advertising on the New York metro. Furthermore, public showings of films comparing the Vietnam and Iraq Wars and protest exhibitions open to the public allowed the distinction between observer and participant to dissolve. Expression of dissent was not limited to the producers of posters and political artworks, but rather incorporated anyone who picked up a poster at an independent bookstore, ordered a print online, or stopped to examine a gallery showing dissident art. With all of Manhattan mobilized around the Republican National Convention and the agitation it

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231 Ibid.
232 Ibid.
incited, the same sort of community spirit was invoked as during mass protests such as Angry Arts Week or the Peace Tower.

The issue of how to cut through the layer of advertising images with which New Yorkers came into contact each day was as present in 2004 as in 1968. Like artists and designers of the Vietnam Era, those combating repressive politics today have developed innovative strategies to circumvent a similar deluge of imagery and advertising visuals. Contemporary artists have set their designs apart by using a variety of methods, many of which echo the visual strategies used by designers of the 1960s. Some keep their designs raw and unfinished, clearly handmade, in an effort to set themselves apart from streamlined advertising graphics. Others choose to parody popular advertising gimmicks, such as the posters protesting the Abu Ghraib prison scandal that came to light in 2004. San Francisco artist Robert Anderson covered the walls of his home city with his poster design depicting the now iconic silhouette of a hooded prisoner standing on a pedestal, set against the American flag with the caption “Got Democracy?”

In similar fashion, two political artists working anonymously in Los Angeles under the name Forkscrew Graphics started the well-known line of posters mimicking Apple Computer’s trendy iPod billboards (Fig. 21). The design, also featuring the Abu Ghraib image and the verbal joke “iRaq”, appeared in Los Angeles, New York, and even parts of Europe. Often the distributors would paste their design over existing iPod billboards, where the contrast of the tortured figure with the dancing silhouettes

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of the iPod ads created a surprising and shocking effect.\textsuperscript{236} When the graphic was featured in the 2004 election issue of the \textit{Nation}, its creators stated: “We want to show that no matter how manipulated the media sphere becomes, and no matter how many tons of messages the marketing world dumps on the public, there are ways to take the symbols of marketing and use them to disrupt the barrage of commercial communication.”\textsuperscript{237} Contemporary artists have either set themselves completely apart from advertising and media visuals by maintaining an unfinished, artisanal aesthetic, or have put commercial devices to political uses mocking the very ubiquity and popular meaning that makes these designs successful.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{236} Milton Glaser and Mirko Ilić, \textit{The Design of Dissent} (Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers, Inc., 2005), 66.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Peter Selz, \textit{Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 72.
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Another parallel with the sixties and seventies was the institutions’ role in promoting this activism. Holland Cotter’s tone in his review of Spero’s retrospective suggests that a fair amount of animosity towards large museums has survived since the Vietnam Era. He writes that the show gives Ms. Spero a place in the big picture of 20th-century art, one that will emerge after big-gun institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney have cleaned all the bulky canonical junk out of their closets, and told the story a new way.  

Cotter had another opportunity to review Spero’s work, which shows his willingness to excuse lapses in quality and focus rather on the strength of the political message of the piece. In his review of Spero’s work in the “Persistent Vestiges” show, Cotter notes that Spero’s later work is somewhat lackluster. Attributing it to her poor health and the recent loss of her husband, Leon Golub, he writes “to some degree the effort shows in the results: two wide white walls, empty except for a few cinder-dark images of helicopters and piled-up bodies.” Yet he quickly moves on, in a readiness to focus on the political purpose of the piece that contrasts with more conservative, formalist critics of the 1960s and 1970s. “Yet, with their desert-like blankness and downward gravitational pull,” he describes, “the wall pieces […] are severe and cold-eyed. They bring to mind the description of war […] as a killing machine with an unknowable force at the controls.”

Significant progress has been made since Hilton Kramer bashed the formal differences of emotional antiwar pieces, since MoMA refused to back the AWC’s protest poster, and since Philip Leider ignored the weighty statement of the Peace Tower in 1966. Although, as Cotter points out, MoMA and the Whitney may still focus on the more highly celebrated works of art history, the Whitney’s cooperation with the art-political world during the 2004 RNC suggests that the AWC’s battle against museums’ political reserve has not been forgotten. The Whitney’s 2004 shows “Memorials of War” and “War! Protest in America” display a much more supportive and approving attitude towards dissenting art.

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Furthermore, *Artforum*’s cancelling of their planned September material for a portfolio of highly political work protesting government policy is another indication that the efforts of the AWC, GAAG, and other artists’ groups were harbingers of a turnaround in art criticism. When Leider, *Artforum*’s editor in 1966, declined to comment on the Peace Tower and claimed that “art and politics do not mix,” the AWC’s goals seemed distant.\(^{240}\) Although many of the writers and editors for the publication, including Leider, were sympathetic to the antiwar cause, transforming these individual sentiments into an institutional statement was exceedingly rare. The fact that this occurred so readily almost 40 years later is a sign that the sixties protests against art world reticence had a lasting effect, and perhaps set in motion a trend of increasing political engagement that includes the Whitney’s antiwar exhibitions, and *Artforum*’s September 2004 protest issue.

It is important to realize that a great deal of time had elapsed between the Vietnam Era and the Iraq War, and consequently we cannot assume that these institutions’ receptiveness to political adversity is a direct result of the Vietnam Era political art movement. Political art appeared in many guises in the interim, sometimes defending gay rights, sometimes advocating for increased recognition of the AIDS crisis, sometimes rallying women with the slogan “Your Body is a Battleground.” However, protest art of the Vietnam War broke down many boundaries, both in the art world and without, paving the way for future periods of protest art to take up arms with less institutional and media opposition. Feminist art took up political art where the antiwar movement left off, becoming an extremely

\(^{240}\) Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 84.
vital part of the feminist movement. This is partly due to the fact that art culture was already somewhat accustomed to art’s use as a political tool.

Artists made direct references to the Vietnam War in their work well through the 1980s. Often, these references are found in the work of returning veterans seeking to give voice to their experiences and thoughts on the war, but just as often the war was memorialized by artists who seemed still to be grappling with the magnitude and implications of the war. The continuing appearance of Vietnam images suggests that Americans struggled with the emotions and opinions that the Vietnam War brought to the surface long after it was officially over. Works like Jerry Kearns *Madonna and Child* (1986) revived Nick Ut’s photograph of the young girl Kim Phuc running from napalm gas, and served as reminders of the guilt, loss, and confusion American citizens experienced during and after the war. Later references to the Vietnam War in art suggest its ongoing relevance to American identity and culture. The conflict being the image-heavy occurrence that it was, art provides a large part of this commentary through its continued reinterpretation of the most powerful Vietnam icons.

Political art, particularly in the poster realm, played an important role in strengthening the identity and unity of the antiwar movement. By providing visual expressions of the emotion and conviction behind the antiwar movement, posters created a visual image of the antiwar movement in itself. Along with other hallmarks of the activist lifestyle, political graphics both conveyed a political conviction and identified their owners as members of a particular group of people who were unified by a common purpose: ending the war in Vietnam. Likewise, political art groups like the AWC and GAAG allowed artists to take part in a communal venture, which to
many of them was exhilarating and meaningful. The sense of cooperation, of being part of a group fighting for a common cause, was amplified by the visual expression of these groups that dissident art provided.

Most importantly, however, political art was used as a tool to reach audiences outside of these groups, and to link different spheres of political activism. The Peace Tower served as an emotional rallying point for like-minded people in the neighborhood it mobilized, while GAAG used performance and theatrics to involve and engage surrounding audiences. Large-scale productions like Angry Arts Week took a great deal of organization and cooperation between different artistic mediums, and fostered connections between politically engaged circles that might not otherwise have coincided. Similarly, Morrel’s flag works made national headlines, and in doing so alerted multitudes of readers of the New York Times, Arts in America, and Life magazine to Radich’s cause. The case promoted discussion that was simultaneously concerned with artistic expression, free speech, and American foreign policy. In this way, art served as a catalyst for debates that coincided with larger issues, thus addressing audiences that were outside the usual scope of the fine art community. Likewise, the poster fad created links between poster artists who shared and drew from each other’s design, while organizations like the Committee to Unsell the War prompted the distribution of political graphics to mass audiences. Posters’ commercial background made them easily adaptable to slots in magazines, newspapers, or billboards, making use of public space and visibility to speak to diverse audiences.
Finally, political art of the Vietnam Era provides a visual representation of the spirit and desperation of the antiwar movement. While a myriad of descriptions of antiwar protests exist, few encapsulate the emotional intensity of a country at war with itself. Protest art, in its poster and fine art forms, gives us a visual description of the war to look back on, as well as a counter to the media’s representation of the war. These protest works show the side not represented in speeches and press releases. The political art addressed in this work place the images of the Vietnam War in a critical framework, showing artists’ direct reactions to the American government’s actions and policy. This viewpoint is invaluable, and as a body of work does much to immortalize the antiwar spirit of the Vietnam Era. Perhaps the real legacy of protest art lies in the framework it established for those seeking to express a political statement not in keeping with that promoted by governmental authority. Its strategies and rhetoric create a model for artistic protest, one that has been reapplied in recent years to protest the Iraq War, a situation that is chillingly similar to the target of antiwar 40 years ago. As the surge of political art in 2004 reminds us, the history of the Vietnam War isn’t over. Rather, it is recalled in art and politics, to address a government that seems as blissfully ignorant of its citizens’ wishes today as it did 40 years ago. The legacy of Vietnam’s dissident art is ongoing, and will continue to hold meaning as long as we see in our government actions worth challenging, and in our country a cause worth defending.
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