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THEY SAID *WHAT*?

I first came across the statements from the Art Workers' Coalition 1969 Open Hearing while doing some library research about the history of artists' involvement in the labour movement. The statements consisted of a stack of photocopies of typewritten and in some cases handwritten documents. Some of the documents had been photocopied multiple times and were barely legible. Some of them had been overwritten, and all the editing changes were visible (this was before word processing, or even computers). As I researched further, I found out more about the Art Workers' Coalition.

The AWC began in 1969 when the sculptor Takis, along with a group of friends, removed a sculpture from the 'Machine' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, because he was not consulted on what he saw as exhibiting a work which no longer represented his current art practice. This act drew attention to the conditions for artistic production and the political responsibility of the artistic community. It also took place within the broader context of feminist, anti-racist and anti-Vietnam War movements, and the critiques of artistic autonomy that were beginning to emerge out of Conceptual Art and Minimalism. The group supporting Takis presented the director of MOMA with a list of 13 demands, one of them being an open hearing on museum reform. They were refused, so they instead held the meeting at the School of Visual Arts on 10 April 1969. The open hearing was entitled 'What Should Be the Program of The Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform, and to Establish the Program of the Art Workers' Coalition'. Each person read a statement aloud. The statements questioned the artist's role in society, the function of art institutions and the market, and how both were connected to the military-industrial complex (such as, for example, through board members of art institutions who were either connected to corporations who directly financed the Vietnam War, or media outlets that promoted US involvement in Vietnam). The AWC was involved in so many different social movements and had different,

contradictory demands (which ranged from a wing of MOMA which would present the work of African-American and Puerto Rican artists, to regulation of the art market, though accepting its basic principles, to calls for total revolution). These created tensions which eventually led the group to dissolve after a few years, splitting along lines of race, gender and different approaches to political strategy. However, the AWC as well as the various factions that often developed in opposition to the AWC led to the development of many other organisations, some of which still exist, including: Guerilla Art Action Group, El Taller Boricua/Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Centre, Museo El Barrio, AIR Gallery (a feminist art organisation), and the Artist Community Credit Union.

The passionate and declarative, even manifesto-like nature of the statements called for them to be read aloud, which was what led me to explore the 're-speaking' of the statements in the project *The AWC 1969 Open Hearing Revisited.*. What also struck me was their use of oppositional language, which to me seemed lacking in a largely depoliticised art world. Terms such as 'revolution' and 'liberation' came up quite frequently. There were also some very harsh condemnations of how deeply culture was implicated in processes of imperialism and war. One of the statements that stays with me the most was about the involvement of architects in South African apartheid, written by a group called the Architects' Resistance, and which contained the phrase, 'somewhere an SOM [for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill] architect is drawing two sets of toilets, one black and one white'. Both the oppositional tone of the statements, and the clarity of the political positions taken by the authors stood out for me, because it seemed so much as odds with how I feel I hear many artists speak about politics, which often seems to be about a kind of post-ideological professionalization.

The project, which took place within the framework of the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest #5, involved putting out an open call for people to read the Open Hearing statements aloud, and also to

reflect on the experience of reading and the associations, memories and questions the statement brought up for them. People who responded to the call could download PDFs of the Open Hearing statements, and choose one to read aloud. I recorded the conversations and posted them online as MP3 files at www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org.

In a well-known phrase in 'On the Concept of History', Walter Benjamin calls for the historical materialist to explode a particular epoch, life or work out of the continuum of history, or in other words, 'a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past' (Benjamin: 1940). It occurred to me that my fascination with the AWC 1969 Open Hearing was along these lines: deliberately using a past moment to interrogate the present, rather than trying to recreate the historical accuracy of a 're-enactment' as conventionally defined. I will now map out the specific ways that I feel the AWC Open Hearing statements interrogate the present.

I couldn't believe they said that

The statements contradicted those conventional art historical narratives where artists preoccupy themselves with only making art and never become directly involved in politics (conventional art history as historicism). To see overtly politicised statements written by figures such as Carl Andre or Dan Graham contradicted my understanding of them and the kinds of artists I thought they were. It also made me wonder how much political involvement becomes erased from art history, because it is seen as 'external' to the activity of making work. Of course, the irony is that some of the artists who made very trenchant criticisms of the relationship of art to capitalism later on went on to make a great deal of money in the art market, which raises questions about commitment. It is very easy to dismiss these statements as the hypocrisy of 'a hell of a lot of very sleazy grandstanding, coming on as, I don't know what, Che Guevera' (Paul Brach interviewed by Barry Schwartz, 1971), which was in part dependent

on the white, male charisma of the 'artist-revolutionary'.

As documents, the AWC statements also function as a kind of physical evidence: they show to us that person *did* say that particular thing, at that point in time, as full of problems and contradictions as it was. Because the documents were mostly typewritten or handwritten, the corrections and editing decisions were visible. It is harder to seamlessly delete anything that seams silly or contentious or embarrassing than with word processing. While I am aware that it was a function of the technology of that time, there was something disarming about it, a sense of not be able to cover mistakes or be too careful about what we say in public. In terms of what this is interrogating, I would say it is the carefulness around speech, the worry about reputation and losing symbolic or social capital, perhaps even the sense that saying the wrong thing could function as *bad public relations* even on the micro-level of interpersonal relationships. This could be seen as an aspect of the 'society of control' (Deleuze), as well as the result of the pressure to be an 'enterprising individual' (Rose).

But another issue about reading statements that were written in another time, even those written that long ago,is about encountering *language that we would never use today*: certain expressions or phrases that now sound strange and unfamiliar. Beyond now-quaint sounding slang or turns of phrase, I am interested in the political language we feel we can comfortably use without losing our credibility, at different points in time. How do the parameters of 'credibility' shift and change at different moments in history, and how are these boundaries monitored or policed, both by ourselves or by others (again, an example of the 'society of control'? How do they reflect particular political hegemonies, 'common sense' (Gramsci) and codes of proper behaviour? In other words, can we use a term like 'revolution' today without sounding ridiculous? Do we stop ourselves from using such a term because we feel that nobody will take us seriously, to the point where it disappears from speech altogether? Out of the sense

of the failure and exhaustion of that language ('revolution' as empty rhetoric or even advertising slogan for 'hip consumerism') and the knowledge that things are much more complicated, have we now become much more cautious, and even constricted in the kind of language we can use to talk about politics?

I am suggesting that these ideologies and processes of self-censorship have been internalised to the point of becoming instinctive. This is not only a rational, but also an emotional and physical process: certain words *feel wrong,* they sit awkwardly in our mouths as we speak them. Our cheeks flush, as though we are publicly embarrassing ourselves, saying something we know we shouldn't. This is one of the reasons I asked people to read the AWC Open Hearing documents: for people to physically experience and articulate that sense of awkwardness, and, through the recording process, to capture people's negotiation with these words and concepts from another time, which seem inappropriate right now. In the readings, some people laughed or sounded surprised or shocked when reading the statements.

If only we all wore suits...

One of the reasons why this language seems inappropriate is because of cautious pragmatism on the Left, connected to the deep-seated belief (which we see played out in electoral politics) that we must appeal to the mainstream if we are to win anything, learn to speak the language of the dominant culture, and avoid any contentious issue that might alienate the less politicised. I see this as a result of repeated defeats and marginalisation on an institutional level (as right wing governments are elected in many places) and the self-flagellation that occurs on the Left as a result: if only we could have spoken in terms that the 'mainstream' could understand, we would have won. Part of this pragmatism, of course, is an obsession with 'winnability' and being seen as 'realistic' and 'practical' within a right-wing

framework where the Left must continually apologise for having any principles, and agonise about self-marginalisation. In a wider sense, I also see it as symptomatic of a neoliberal consensus, which depoliticises language (as well as, it could be argued, social relations and life in general).

Never be caught with your pants down

Another aspect of this cautiousness (or perhaps one of the 'behaviour codes') a sense of knowingness: we're all supposed to be 'in the know'., and we're all supposed to know how to play the game. In a larger sense, this may have something to do with professionalization, the internalisation of business values as well as the fact hat we simply have to have our wits about us these days, because of the collapse of certain state structures (which of course never served certain people to begin with).

The need for new forms of oppositional language

The AWC 1969 Open Hearing statements are compelling for their oppositional spirit. Of course, the point is not to return to 1969; some of the statements are actually quite problematic, and reflect some sexist, racist and homophobic attitudes. What is the most useful about them is how they *unsettle* the relationship between the past and the present; implicitly they call for new forms of oppositional language.

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