The Museum Industrial Complex: Institutional Critique in the New York Art World, 1960-1970s

Alexander Gabriel
Susquehanna University

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The 1960s and 1970s were decades of political, social, and cultural turmoil that impacted the entire globe. Across the United States, this change was palpable in all aspects of society, with protests across the country that advocated for civil rights for Black Americans, environmental protections, and full economic and social rights for women. One of the most widespread movements during these decades was that of the anti-war effort in which Americans across the country pushed for the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The role of art, artists, and art institutions in society has increasingly been questioned by various artists and art movements. For example, Andy Warhol, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt pioneered art movements such as Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. By incorporating popular culture content, creating sculpture with industrially produced material, removing the hand of the artist from the creative process, and dematerializing the art object, their work challenged traditional modes for making art. At the same time, a number of artists created politically engaged art that addressed the social inequities of the time. They sparked conversations about the complicity of art institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, with the Vietnam War.

The Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), Hans Haacke, and the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) worked amidst this political context, responding directly to the ways in which the Vietnam War impacted museum spaces. Each of these practitioners found new ways to challenge the role of museums in ever-changing cultural landscapes

using shock-filled performances, sociological methods of data gathering, and explicit posters. Additionally, these artists were part of the first generation of Institutional Critique practitioners. A term coined by American performance artist Andrea Fraser, Institutional Critique refers to a method of art-making in which artists call attention to the exclusionary structures of the art world to advocate for a more equitable system. The use of Institutional Critique allowed for these artists to expose the Museum Industrial Complex, a term that American art historian Nicolas Lampert employs to refer to the prioritization of funding that overshadowed the commitment of a museum to art. Making use of information as their artistic media, the Guerrilla Art Action Group's *Bloodbath* (figure 1), Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll* (figure 2), and the Art Workers' Coalition's *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies* (figure 3) utilize Institutional Critique as a means of bringing to light the Museum Industrial Complex. This is manifested in the ethical issues unveiled by highlighting the disconnect between the supposedly neutral museums and the places from which they received funding.

The Vietnam War (1955-1975) was the first war in United States history in which citizens encountered the death and destruction taking place in a foreign country in real-time. Michael J. Arlen famously described this event as a "living room war" that sparked outrage across the country after the United States became involved in 1965.[1] Tensions reached their peak in 1968 after the major North Vietnamese attack called the Tet Offensive affirmed that the war would rage on for many more years to come. The anti-war movement extended quickly into the art world.

GAAG was formed in 1969 by Jean Toche and Jon Hendricks amidst the height of anti-Vietnam sentiments. The year prior to their formation, protests against the war had grown exponentially with outbreaks of police brutality against anti-war protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, inciting even more public outrage.[2] In response to this government backed violence, GAAG sought to bring to light the deep connections between the war and MoMA.

Bloodbath occurred on November 18, 1969, as the two founders of GAAG, Jon Hendricks and Jean Toche, accompanied by two other artists, Poppy Johnson and Silvianna Goldsmith, entered the atrium of MoMA as any other museum visitors. Shortly after

entering, the men dressed in suits and the women in street clothes began throwing 100 copies of their manifesto into the air and started to attack one another. Screaming and clawing at each other's bodies, a bloody scene was soon produced as they punctured bags of beef blood that were hidden underneath their clothing. As the blood dripped down their bodies, the fighting slowly faded, and their screams were silenced as the group lay on the floor as if dead. Their performance was over within minutes, yet its message had just begun to permeate the art world. The four artists stood and were greeted by applause from the crowd that had formed around them. As they got up to leave, someone from the crowd asked if they had a representative from the group with whom they could speak. GAAG's answer was to "Read our letter."[3]

Their manifesto, titled "A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art," outlined clear connections between the members of the board of trustees to ongoing, unfavorable militaristic support of the Vietnam War. The text noted that Nelson and David Rockefeller—the latter was the chairman of MoMA's Board of Trustees—owned twenty percent of McDonnell Aircraft Corporation, a company that was known for its involvement in chemical and biological warfare. Additionally, it pointed out the fact that the Rockefellers "owned 65 percent of the Standard Oil Corporation, a company that had leased one of its plants to United Technology to manufacture napalm."[4] With these facts illuminated, GAAG went on to state that the donations that came from the bloodied hands of the Rockefellers were "destroying the integrity of art" and that MoMA should not exist if they had to rely on money that came from the suffering of others.[5]

Through this performance, GAAG sought to expose the concealed structures of MoMA and similar art world institutions. Until recent decades, museums separated themselves from the politics of the outside world, proclaiming that they were neutral spaces whose sole purpose was to display artwork. In his 1970 essay "Function of the Museum," artist Daniel Buren states that this alleged neutrality extended into every part of the modern art museum, including the way art is exhibited.[6] The strings, nails, stretchers, and even in some cases, the frame itself, are hidden from view, leaving visible only the ideal image of a museum. Similarly,

museums attempt to hide the inner workings of their institution, such as donors like the Rockefellers who garnered their money from unsavory sources or the people hired to maintain the physical appearance of art galleries, as socially engaged artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles suggests in "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!" (1969).[7] As Ukeles explains, those hired to maintain the upkeep of the museum space, whether that included installing works of art or sweeping floors, were largely people of color or women. Coincidentally, it is this same labor force that was often hidden from the public eye, often in an attempt to prevent questions about the identities of those who filled higher up positions. [8]

Like Buren suggests in "Function of Museum," the purposeful hiding away of all things deemed unfit for public consumption contributed to the neutral front established and upheld by museums. However, Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, notes in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field,* every aspect of life is interconnected, with each entity influencing others even if subconsciously.[9] In other words, it is impossible to separate any one institution from the context in which it exists. When applied to museums, the stance that such an institution can remain free from contemporary politics becomes impossible to support and the connections between wars, unethical business practice, and economically motivated decision making becomes hard to deny. And, as a result, their façade of neutrality begins to fade.

In addition to recognizing the interconnectedness of museums and militaristic endeavors, GAAG, like many of their first-generation Institutional Critique peers, understood the museum space as functioning in a similar manner to that of a national government.[10] This meant that the museum received unabashed criticism similar to the kind addressed towards the United States government in the late 1960s, as seen in events such as the Miss America pageant protest in 1968. The anti-war protest inside MoMA was made particularly vivid in choreographing gruesome imagery that included four civilians tearing one another apart, leaving behind only contorted bodies and a puddle of blood. This visual component of the protest was coupled with GAAG's manifesto, and together they revealed the connections between the war in Vietnam and the highly influential members of MoMA's board of trustees. Through these actions, GAAG was able to quickly dismantle the alleged neutrality of MoMA.

Making that which was invisible, visible, was also the goal of German American artist Hans Haacke. Considered one of the forefathers of institutional critique, Haacke described his work from the 1960s and 1970s as "real-time social system[s] operating in an art context."[11] He has proclaimed that his artwork is meant to serve as a trap in which the hidden innerworkings of museums can be caught and exposed. His 1970 work titled *MoMA Poll* is no exception. *MoMA Poll* was an installation that consisted of two transparent plexiglass ballot boxes (one which was for "yes" responses and one for "no's") and a question that asked viewers, "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 ballots used to cast these votes were distributed to visitors upon arrival at the museum, each slip of paper a different color that corresponded to the amount of money that guests had spent to enter. By the end of the exhibition, the "yes" responses outnumbered the "no's" by nearly double. Like GAAG, Haacke saw the connections between the board of trustees and the war in Vietnam, subsequently breaking the alleged neutrality of MoMA. However, unlike GAAG and their graphic, violent performances, Hans Haacke used sociological data-gathering methods to reveal MoMA's participation in the war.

The institutional placement of *MoMA Poll* was vital to its meaning. By locating this work within the museum space, Haacke limited the participants to those who directly supported MoMA through entrance fees and donations. Not only a critique specifically targeted towards MoMA, *MoMA Poll* also represented, more broadly, a critique of the invisible innerworkings of the art institution, which is often comprised of oppressive and exclusionary structures perpetuated by complacent museum goers, critics, curators, and artists. In a 1974 statement, Haacke affirmed that, no matter how anti-institution an artist's work, they are not free from the binds of these problematic frameworks.[12] Such a self-reflective approach to the critique of institutions, where 'the art institution' is conceptualized as an entity that exerts its power and influence beyond a physical building, was uncommon amongst the first wave of Institutional Critique practitioners. In the 2005 edition of the *Artforum* journal, Fraser published her essay titled "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique" on Institutional

Critique's history and future. According to Fraser, critics commonly associated with Institutional Critique often wrote of early artistic initiatives as existing outside of the institution. Yet, as is seen in the writings of early practitioners, such as Haacke, the connection between art, artist, and art institution is clearly outlined. The approach presented by early critics failed to account for the institution of art that exists beyond the walls of a museum and one that includes the people, educational structures, and writings that create the bureaucratic structures that make up the art world. This becomes especially important as people attempt to escape this system, only to find that "we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it."[13] To resolve this conundrum, Fraser encourages practitioners of Institutional Critique to recognize their place within the system and consider what they can do to change it from the inside out.[14]

MoMA Poll not only questioned the involvement of MoMA in the Vietnam War, but it also critiqued the artists, curators, critics, and visitors supporting such an institution. Haacke first began exploring the museum as a system in works such as *Condensation Cube* (1963-1965), which consisted of a plexiglass box that was placed within a gallery. As guests entered and left the space, moisture within the cube would either increase or decrease in accordance with the relative temperature of the space. As the form and meaning of the work is dependent on its location in a gallery, Haacke acknowledged the significance of the museum as a reciprocal network in which the viewer directly impacts both the artwork and institution.[15] Visitors who participated in *MoMA Poll*, as well as those who may have neglected the work, were implicated in the cycle of violence that MoMA was perpetuating through their acceptance of "bloodmoney." Those who entered the museum supported an institution that was complicit in, if not supportive of, the Vietnam War. Participants simultaneously engaged in critique and were critiqued.

Another work that critiqued MoMA's involvement in Vietnam was created by the Art Workers' Coalition also referred to as AWC, a group of artists, critics, art administrators, and writers active from 1969 to 1971. Throughout their active years, the group sought to forge better working rights for artists through initiatives such as their program for change which urged museums to take on the role of

employer by paying for rental fees and health insurance to exhibited artists.[16] Although short-lived, the organization led other artists to pursue new methods of institutional critique, such as GAAG, who sought to create more radical interventions than the AWC, as well as Hans Haacke whose interest in information as a medium came from his time in the group. While some members of the AWC wished to tear down the art world and start anew, others sought to reform the system that was already in place to create a more open environment.[17]

One of their most gruesome works was that of *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies.* a lithograph poster created in 1969 that is slightly over two feet tall and three feet wide and depicts a scene of utter devastation. The viewer is confronted by a pile of dead bodies found along a dirt path. The victims lay contorted, their clothing torn and their bodies bloody from the onslaught of violence they encountered just moments before. Most unsettling, though, is the sight of deceased babies who lay in the same state as their parents. The dirt road continues beyond what can be seen in the photo, yet a viewer could imagine that a similar sight of senseless bloodshed might be found just beyond the bounds of the camera's lens. Superimposed over this image are the words "Q. (question) And babies? A. (answer) and babies," written in thick, red text.

This brutal assault on a small Vietnamese village took place on March 16, 1968, yet news would not break on this story until November 12, 1969. According to reports, on that day in March, a U.S. Army platoon entered the village of Mỹ Lai, opening fire on every man, woman, and child that was present. According to the United States military, between 175 to 500 Vietnamese citizens were killed that day. However, according to Vietnamese reports, the death toll was closer to 600, a number which accounted for nearly everyone who had lived in Mỹ Lai. The photos taken that day by Ronald Haeberle were hidden from the United States Army and the public until November of 1969 when they were printed in mass, including the one used to create *And Babies*. Four days later, an interview between PVT Paul Meadlo and CBS News reporter Mike Wallace appeared on the CBS Evening News. Meadlo had participated in the slaughter and, when asked to describe his orders, stated that they were ordered to kill everyone in the village. When Mike Wallace asked Meadlo if this order included "women and babies," Meadlo

famously responded "And babies,"[18] a response which inspired the text found on the poster.

The production of *And Babies* was originally intended to be a joint effort between the members of the AWC Poster Committee and MoMA. After the news of Mỹ Lai broke, the AWC reached out to MoMA and asked if they would be willing to co-sponsor a poster that addressed the horrors of the Vietnam War. At first, this collaboration appeared to be in the works, with MoMA agreeing to meet with the AWC to discuss details. The plan was for the AWC to create the poster and to cover the printing costs of 5,000 copies while MoMA would ship the poster to institutions across the world. However, shortly after this meeting, MoMA's board of trustees quickly ended any possibility of collaboration. They issued a statement in which they affirmed that the decision to pull away from this project was one made by the entire museum because of a joint commitment to "their interest in art."[19] This statement implied that the sole reason for MoMA's refusal to collaborate with the AWC was that an informational poster such as *And Babies* was not art. Thus, the museum could avoid explicit political action while simultaneously affirming their position as a neutral institution dedicated to the display of art. Despite this refusal, the AWC successfully produced their posters, simultaneously protesting the war in Vietnam and exposing the prioritization of funding within the museum.

As opposed to using symbolic imagery to engage in conversations about the war, as seen in GAAG's *Bloodbath*, AWC chose to bring the horrors of war to the forefront using explicit journalistic evidence. The decision to use a photo taken after the destruction of Mỹ Lai leaves no room for confusion or debates about possible interpretations. The message is clear: the war in Vietnam is devastating to all, from men and women to the elderly and babies. MoMA's refusal to take a stand against such violence clearly implicated them as defenders of, if not participants in, the horrors visualized in *And Babies*. Their attempt at producing a statement that would affirm their place as a neutral institution had the opposite effect, ultimately exposing the lack of democracy within the museum space and, subsequently, the significance of money within museum decisions. According to Lampert, the decision to release a statement that was written by a select few on behalf of the entire museum exposed the true lack of democracy within the institution. And, as he

explains, "The board at MoMA…was comprised of hyperwealthy individuals who represented some of the most powerful corporate and media entities in the country,"[20] none of whom represented the wants and needs of the many curators, janitorial staff, and volunteers who worked at the museum. Instead of looking for their input, the board of trustees spoke on behalf of employees to uphold the oppressive values and ideologies that they aligned themselves with, as evident from the pro-war business endeavors that the Rockefellers undertook during this time. Consequently, MoMA eliminated any opportunity for a truly inclusive gallery space.

The common thread between these three artists is a dedication to the critique of the Museum Industrial Complex and the top-down decision-making often found in large institutions. In different ways, each artist and art group exposed the overwhelming influence that funding had over MoMA and many similar institutions. GAAG did so in the form of a bloody performance and a manifesto that exposed the connections between the museum and the Vietnam War. For Haacke, critique appeared in the form of a poll open to MoMA's visitors, ultimately reflecting the majority anti-war sentiment of museumgoers and the discrepancy between the public's opinions and the museum's actions. For the AWC, critique came through a controversially horrific poster and MoMA's refusal to stand against war. Despite their differing media, each artist sought to challenge the authority of funding within powerful art museums in order to pave the way for future institutions that are truly equitable for all.

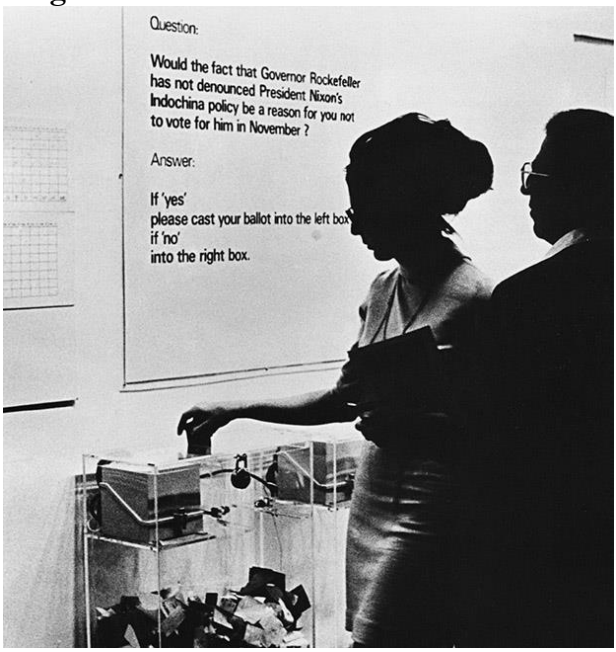
The historical legacy of institutional critique remains ever present in the twenty-first century. The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous art activist group, is one of the most palpable examples of the lasting impact of Haacke, AWC, and GAAG. Active since their 1985 formation in New York City, the Guerrilla Girls have utilized informative posters and staged interventions, much like the first generation of Institutional Critique practitioners, to expose systemic misogyny and racism within museums and art education. Referencing sexual abuse allegations against artist Chuck Close, one poster from 2018, which reads "3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label When the Artist is a Sexual Predator," does just this. Utilizing the bright colors and satirical writing style typical of their posters, the Guerrilla Girls offer three wall labels that discuss the same artist, Chuck Close, with varying degrees of transparency. This work was created in response

to the continued support of the artist's work, even after a number of sexual assault allegations came out against him. By commandeering the typical wall label format to juxtapose biographies that both included and excluded Close's predation, the Guerrilla Girls directly critiqued the tendency within museums to protect male artists, even if they are accused of being sexual predators. Alongside countless others, they continue to advocate for the dissolution of the many barriers that prevent true justice within the art world.

Figure 1

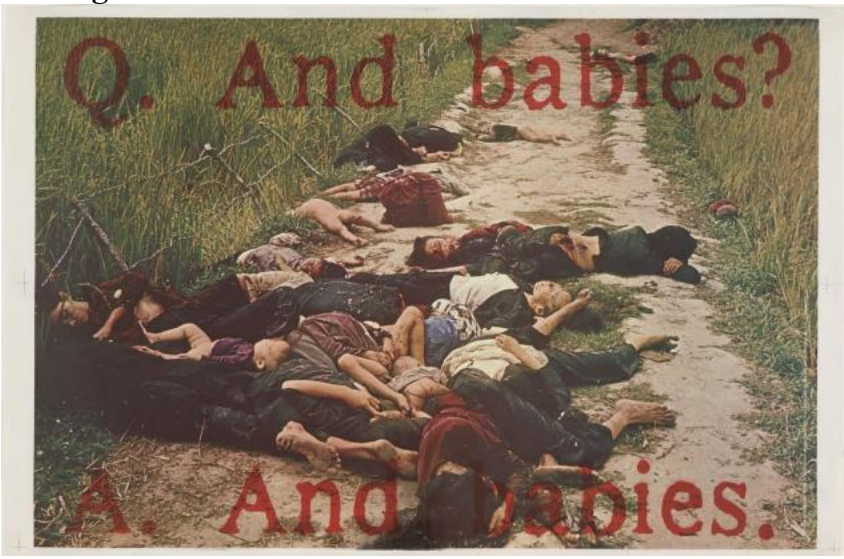
Guerrilla Art Action Group, *Bloodbath*, 1969. Courtesy of InEnArt.

Figure 2



Hans Haacke, *MoMA Poll*, 1970. Courtesy of WikiArt.

Figure 3



Art Workers' Coalition, *Q. And Babies? A. And Babies*, 1969. Courtesy of Center for the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Notes

[1] Arlen, *Living-Room*, *passim*.
[2] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 214.
[3] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 212.
[4] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 213.
[5] Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 86.
[6] Buren, *Function of the Museum*, *passim*.
[7] Ukeles, *Manifesto*, 1-4.
[8] Alberro and Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, 6.
[9] Bourdieu, *Rules*, 231.
[10] Bourdieu, *Rules*, 488.
[11] Bourdieu, *Rules*, 6.
[12] Harrison, Wood, and Haacke, "Hans Haacke," 931.
[13] Fraser, "Critique of Institutions,"
[14] Fraser, "Critique of Institutions," 105.
[15] Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 177.
[16] Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 178.
[17] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 215.
[18] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 220.
[19] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 222.
[20] Lampert, *People's Art History*, 222.

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