

An Institutional Defense Mechanism: How the Museum of Modern Art Institutionalized Critique

by Ricardo Chavez

Responding to the violence and opposition surrounding the United States' presence in the war in Vietnam (1955-75), the New York-based art collective known as the Art Workers' Coalition (active 1969-71), or AWC, produced the poster *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* (1970), one of the most unsettling artistic statements denouncing warfare of the twentieth century (Fig. 1). The poster documented the actions of U.S. military forces that, in 1968, committed a mass murder of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in what became known as the Mỹ Lai Massacre. Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle (b.1940) captured the gruesome aftermath of the event, showing the bloody remains of women

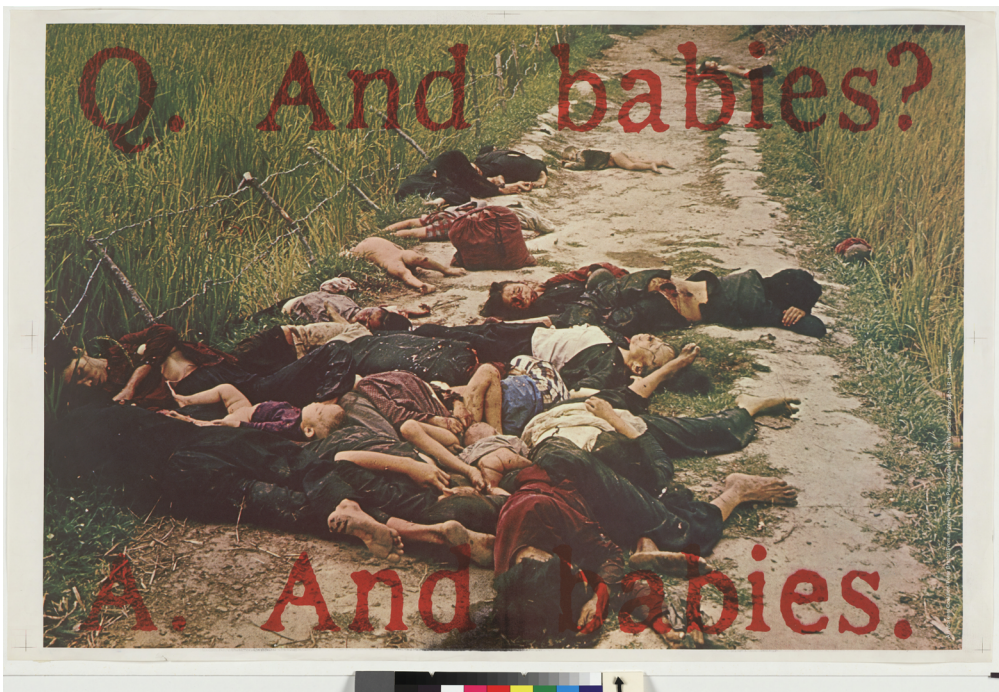


Fig 1. Artists Poster Committee of the Art Workers Coalition, New York, NY and photograph by Ronald L. Haeberle, *Q. And babies? A. And babies.*, 1970, offset lithograph, 25 x 38 in. (63.5 x 96.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, U.S.A. Gift of the Benefit for Attica Defense Fund, Accession Number 498.1978 (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY).

and children lying lifeless on a dirt road. Bullet wounds appear visible in some bodies and hidden beneath the shredded clothes of others. Roughly 15 to 20 victims are visible within the photograph's frames, though the contorted positions they fell in after being gunned down make the exact number difficult to determine. The poster design further intensified the horror in Haerberle's photograph with overlain blood-red text quoting a television interview between Mike Wallace (1918-2012) and army officer Paul Meadlo (n.d.) who, when asked if the attack targeting civilians also included babies, replied simply with the answer, "And babies".¹ The image not only displays photographic evidence of the slaughter and brutality that happened in Vietnam, but also presents the mindless following of military orders by those responsible.

The significance of the history of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* goes beyond the infamous context of its subject matter and composition. The poster's history also calls attention to how the political messages of such artworks are compromised by the art institutions with which they are associated with or displayed in. On January 8th, 1970, the AWC staged a protest inside of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) where *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso (1891-1973) hung on display. Expressing their disapproval of the war in Vietnam and MoMA's indirect support of it via the views and actions of board members and stakeholders, the AWC carried out its protest following the decision to pull the museum out of an agreement to fund and circulate their poster. In other words, the protest became a response to the political decision of the museum board not to stand by the artists, even in spite of the dissenting opinions of some staff members caught in the middle of these opposing yet inherently linked key players that comprise the museum community.

Today that same poster, which challenged the museum and serves as a major example of twentieth-century institutional critique, now finds a home within MoMA's collection and has been exhibited many times over the years. Most surprising of all, the poster appeared on display as early as MoMA's milestone "Information" exhibition (1970) only five months after the AWC protest took place. Yet, one finds that the museum's complicated connection with the poster is part of a larger strategy of recovering from, and even capitalizing on, controversy. This is highlighted in the 2015 library exhibition "Messing with MoMA: Critical Interventions at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939—Now" (2015). As the name suggests, the exhibition, organized by museum librarian Jennifer Tobias (n.d.), looked back on the history of MoMA in order to reflect on the interventions and controversies encountered by the museum since its opening in the 1930s, including the 1970 protest staged by the AWC.² The exhibition laid claim to a certain self-awareness on the part of the museum stakeholders afforded by a willingness to draw attention to moments of less than favorable publicity in the institution's his-

tory. Historical distance certainly facilitates addressing such incidents, but just how much distance, or better yet, how little does it take for a museum or any institution to spotlight its own controversies?

This article examines the history of the curious relationship that developed between MoMA and *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* Assessing the political landscape in which the institution and artists operated at the time of the war, it first recounts the factors and moments that made for an indignant confrontation between the museum and the AWC over their poster. It then reveals how the tactical actions taken shortly after that initial confrontation allowed MoMA to incorporate the poster and its criticisms of the institution as part of exhibitions like "Information". Central to these actions are the differences between the perspectives and intentions of the museum staff from those of the museum board members, especially with regards to supporting the political messages of the art and artists on display. In questioning this quick reversal of attitudes toward *Q. And babies? A. And babies.*, one finds that by learning to embrace institutional critique instead of completely opposing it, a defensive strategy gradually developed within MoMA whereby such criticisms could be touted as part of its institutional narrative as a museum that champions artistic protest despite causing it as well. This in turn raises further reflections on the present moment and future of museums like MoMA as they confront and recontextualize their own histories.

The Protest and the Powerhouse

In 1969, the Art Workers' Coalition formed in New York as a collective of artists, writers, and even museum employees. The Coalition sought to redefine artistic labor as central to "artists' attempts to intervene, through their activism and art making" in matters like the country's involvement in Vietnam.³ The collective planned to make a powerful statement about the war through the production of a horrifying yet telling poster that appropriated firsthand documentation of the atrocities happening overseas. While largely dedicated to confronting the museum about the rights of artists and the implementation of various reforms, the AWC also looked at MoMA and its influential stature as a potential partner in their efforts to magnify the antiwar message in *Q. And babies? A. And babies.*

Having already established a dialogue with museum director John B. Hightower (1933-2013) from previous meetings and negotiations, the collective's plan called for MoMA to co-sponsor the poster, a move that would allow their message to procure a visible stage in not just the art community, but in New York and the country in general.⁴ In November of 1969, the AWC Poster Committee met with a group of MoMA staff members and came to an unofficial agreement whereby MoMA would handle shipping costs and

distribute the poster to other museums around the world.⁵ In the end, the decision to pull the museum out of the partnership led the AWC to blame political pressure from board members and war supporters that included CBS president William S. Paley (1901-90).⁶ Support for the poster meant the projection of a powerful anti-war message with which certain representatives of the museum were not willing to be associated.

Angered by this backtracking, the AWC found a new means for getting their poster in front of the public's eye, this time at MoMA's expense. Alongside members of the offshoot Guerrilla Art Action Group (active 1969-76), or GAAG, the AWC held a protest inside of MoMA on January 3, 1970 (Fig. 2). Holding multiple copies of the *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* poster, the protestors gathered on the third floor where Picasso's *Guernica* was on display in order to draw parallels to the carnage of war featured in both



Fig 2. Jan van Raay. Demonstration at the Museum of Modern Art in front of Picasso's *Guernica* by the Art Workers' Coalition, 1970, photograph. Photo courtesy Jan van Raay.

artworks.⁷ The protest, which became a form of performance art in its own right, featured poetry readings, a local Episcopalian minister offering a memorial service for the dead, and even artist Joyce Kozloff (b.1942) sitting with her own eight-month-old baby in front of the images of murdered mothers and their children (Fig. 3).⁸ Museum staff chose not to intervene that day, but they did

block their access to a board of trustees meeting when the group returned a week later. One notes a disparity between the views and actions of the museum's staff, who initially approved of the partnership and allowed the protest to occur, and those of its board members, who prioritized their own managerial interests above those of the artists and their art. In considering those interests, the following comment made by AWC member Jean Toche (1932-2018) was likely directed purely at the museum board: "[Museums] have become essentially a capitalist tool—a tool for entertainment and a tool to augment the financial wealth of the art world. Change them or destroy them."⁹

Toche's frustration with the governing practices of art institutions understandably stems from the near inescapable ties that his position as an artist maintains with them. The source of the AWC's tension with MoMA is



Fig 3. Jan van Raay. Protesting the Maylai Massacre, Art Workers' Coalition holds a memorial service for all children killed by war in front of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, Reverend Stephen Garmey (left), artist Joyce Kozloff (right), and her son Nicholas (center), 1970, photograph. Museum-Related Photographs, 418, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, U.S.A. (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY).

better understood through an examination of these power structures within which artists as cultural producers operate. As argued by Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) in his theory on the fields of cultural production, artists and other intellectuals “are dominant, in so far as they hold the power and privileges conferred by the possession of cultural capital”, but “are dominated in their relations with those who hold political and economic power”.¹⁰ Despite exercising their power as artists to create a work intended to influence opinions against the war, the AWC encountered opposition in the form of a capitalist-driven museum whose history recounts an ambition to accrue and then maintain power from artistic production.

When MoMA opened in 1929, its directors looked to set it apart from other museums through an innovative classification of artworks outlining a history of modernism. This “utopian moment”, as art historian Alan Wallach

(b.1942) refers to it, made MoMA one of the world's leading authorities on modern art by the middle of the twentieth century.¹¹ This is evidenced by the museum's successful promotion of the international "triumph" of American formalist painting through exhibitions including the aptly named "New American Painting" which toured Europe in 1958-59. The decades that followed saw the museum establish itself as an institutional powerhouse.¹² Coinciding with the beginnings of the postmodernist art movement during the 1950s and 1960s, MoMA attempted to maintain its authority and trend-setting power over then contemporary art only to find diminishing success following exhibitions of the latter decade.¹³ Thus, the museum entered a new phase in its history marked by a desire on the part of its leaders to maintain influence in the evolving art world while assessing how to progress from the utopian art and spirit of modernism it avidly promoted.

One inconvenient development for museums in this new post-modern art world stemmed from the rise of institutional critique as artistic practice. Artists and collectives like Hans Haacke (b.1936) and the aforementioned GAAG group produced conceptual pieces and performances that questioned and criticized the inner workings of institutions, specifically art museums and galleries.¹⁴ Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971) documented the corrupt real estate dealings in New York neighborhoods (Fig. 4). The biting nature of Haacke's piece ultimately resulted in the decision by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York to cancel an exhibition of his work for his refusal to censor its politics.

GAAG relied on far more violent visuals when they organized *Bloodbath* (1969), a performance in which the members ran around the main lobby at MoMA while screaming and colliding with one another in order to burst bags of beef blood hidden beneath their clothes before finally collapsing to the ground. Taking place a few months before the AWC protest, this imitation of the bloodbath happening in Vietnam also involved the group spreading copies of their manifesto, "A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art".¹⁵ Institutional critique made the complexities of the artist-museum relationship more publicly visible. With greater public awareness came greater leverage on the part of artists to use their art and their positions as cultural producers to create disruptions in the exercise of power between them and museums. The great influence that MoMA had accrued as a cultural authority over previous decades now made it an easy target for deconstruction and scrutiny on the part of postmodern artists.

By contextualizing both the *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* poster and subsequent protest within the confrontations of these artists and powerful art institutions, they furthermore fall within the social and political confrontations that defined the 1960s. While demonstrators across the country



Fig 4. Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings*, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971, 9 photostats, 142 gelatin silver prints, and 142 photocopies, Dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Purchased jointly by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York with funds from the Director's Discretionary Fund and the Painting and Sculpture Committee, and the Fundació Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Inv.: 2007.148i. (Digital Image © Whitney Museum of American Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, NY; © Hans Haacke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

organized to address issues about civil rights, labor practices, and freedom of speech, the greatest attention arguably fell on the unpopularity of the United States' involvement in the war in Vietnam. As curator and catalog editor Susan Martin described it, the war had become a lightning rod for all the dissatisfaction expressed during this "age of idealism and rage".¹⁶ Any ties that MoMA possessed to the war were thus bound to likewise attract the attention and scorn of artists practicing both institutional critique and condemnation of the war. The challenges to American capitalist power were taking place at home just as much as they were overseas. Art institutions proved no exception to this.

Building Immunity

Today, the poster and the story of the demonstration remain one of the most notable examples of protest art. *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* underscores the capacity that art possesses to participate in fights against more powerful forces in an attempt to bring to light the injustices they committed. Yet, the fact that this poster now resides in the collection of the institution it once

rallied against and even appeared on display in the very same museum only *five months* after the AWC's January 3rd demonstration seems to dilute the anti-establishment attitude that constitutes its legacy. This prompts a deeper look into how context of display impacts one's understanding of such objects. Institutional critique, in general, eventually entered the realm of mainstream art acceptance, moving "from the critique of institutions to an institution of critique", as Andrea Fraser (b.1965) described it.¹⁷ Writing in 2005, she identified institutional critique as having become an art historical institution as a result of its historical status, which the 2015 "Messing with MoMA" exhibition illustrated in its celebration of past museum controversies. But, from a perspective in 1970, how does one explain the decision to display the AWC poster in MoMA so soon after its creators had to forcibly bring it into the museum building?

This new chapter in the story begins in the spring of 1969 (months before the making of the poster) when the museum's curatorial staff proposed the "Information" exhibition to serve as "'an international report' of the activity of younger artists".¹⁸ Curator Kynaston L. McShine (1935-2018) explained the parameters of "Information" as introducing the recent work of important artists from countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Yugoslavia who "are part of a culture that has been considerably altered by communications systems such as television and film, and by increased mobility".¹⁹ McShine also expressed a desire that the exhibition be "provocative, illuminating, and informative", all qualities that Q. *And babies? A. And babies.*



Fig 5. James Mathews, Installation view of the exhibition, "Information", 1970, photograph. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, U.S.A. (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY).

certainly met.²⁰ Indeed, as an example of art appropriating the journalistic material of its time, the poster fit in perfectly alongside the rest of the exhibition, which included the work of Bruce Nauman (b.1941), Joseph Beuys (1921-86), and Helio Oiticica (1937-80).

"Information", which ran from July to September, also underscored the rise of conceptual art and, perhaps indirectly as the term never appears in the catalog, *institutional critique* itself.²¹ With McShine's eventual blessing, many artists contributed works

critical of the war and the museum, such as Haacke's *MoMA Poll* (1970), a visitors' poll and ballot box that presented museum visitors with the 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?" (Fig. 5).²² Lucy R. Lippard (b.1937), who received special thanks from McShine for her contribution to the exhibition and catalog, provided a game that instructed visitors to match the names of the artists with those of museum trustees. The instructions then directed visitors to contact those trustees and ask them "to spend at least eight hours talking to that artist about art, artists' rights, [and] the relationship of the museum to society at large".²³ The question therefore lies not with whether the AWC poster corresponded with the rest of the exhibition, but with how so much criticism of MoMA's board members was willingly allowed for display.

Much like the political and economic power dynamics that exist between artists and art institutions, as revealed by Bourdieu's fields of cultural production and exemplified by the conflict between the AWC and MoMA, one finds that, in this case, the museum staff and the museum board reacted in accordance with the different levels of power they possess as workers and representatives of MoMA. The museum itself houses its own power dynamics visible in their different views and actions. The staff works closer than the board to the art and the artists as it handles the museum's day-to-day operations. The two events discussed in which the AWC poster appeared within MoMA's walls, first in the protest and then in "Information", occurred as a result of decisions made by the museum staff. They chose not to intervene with the protesters until their attempt to directly confront the board members the next week. As curator, McShine chose to include the poster in the exhibition without any similar fight. In contrast, the board acted upon its own duties and interests removed from those of the staff and artists. Within any museum hierarchy, the board is entrusted to oversee the management of the institution as it effects the art indirectly. The board members regularly allow the staff to make the ground floor decisions while they manage the interests of the museum's investors and stakeholders, comprised of people and organizations with powerful political and economic ties.

Despite their different positions of power in the organizational hierarchy, the views and actions of the staff often conflict with the ways in which the board manages a museum's politics and funding sources. For comparison, the more recent protest organized by Decolonize This Place (active since 2016) against the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019 also demonstrated this tension between staff and board. Intent on ousting Whitney board member Warren B. Kanders (b.1957) over his position as CEO of Safariland, a manufacturer of tear gas and other military products used on migrants and civilians around the world, Decolonize This Place coordinated a series of demonstrations both within and outside of the museum

to publicize information about the atrocities for which they held Kanders accountable.²⁴ Moreover, they planned these actions all while expressing solidarity with the Whitney staff's own demands for accountability by museum management. This solidarity was declared in the form of black and white flyers adorned with a flower next to their message which read, "We understand that we may cause some inconveniences for you and we apologize for any stress or added work, but know that we are in solidarity and our struggles are connected" (Fig. 6). In both this and the AWC protest, the museum staff and board show their capacity to stand on different sides of decisions and actions effecting the institution's operations and transparency, thereby placing the staff in a position to side with the politics and actions of the artists over those of the individuals holding more powerful positions.

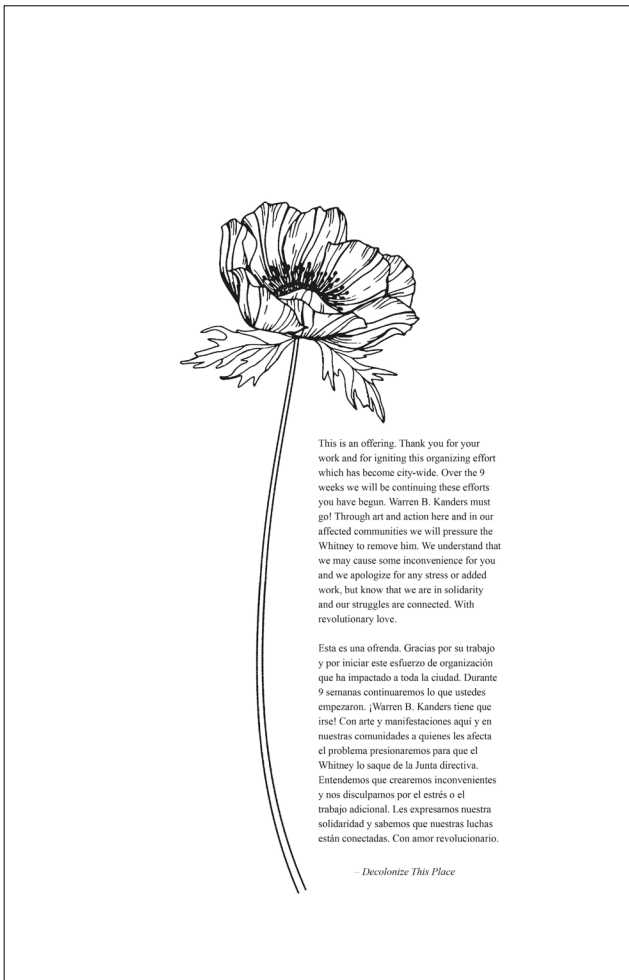


Fig 6. Decolonize This Place, Offering for Whitney Staff, 2019, digital print. Image credit: Decolonize This Place.

This becomes especially vexing for the latter as they operate behind the scenes while the more visible artists use their positions as cultural producers to gain the attention and support of the public.

In the case of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.*, the museum's own curators demonstrated support for the views and actions of the artists over those of the board. McShine brought a unique perspective as not only an international scholar hailing from Trinidad, but as one of the first curators of color to work at a major American museum.²⁵ Coming from a unique background, he perhaps felt more willing to introduce postmodern conceptions of art into MoMA that ventured into political criticism

of the country's foreign actions, as well as the museum's indirect support of them. For whatever reason, *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* apparently spoke to him, as he not only included it in the "Information" exhibition, but also displayed the poster in his office for years afterwards.²⁶

The physical placement of the AWC poster within the exhibition also raises questions about the possible statement McShine wished to make. Rather than display it more traditionally on the museum wall, McShine and the exhibition organizers positioned the poster above a doorway between the museum's galleries (Fig. 7). On the one hand, visitors who walked through the doorway into the poster's room potentially missed seeing it altogether. On the other hand, the unique placement could have also worked to draw further attention to the work, especially from visitors about to exit that room. As with Haacke's *MoMA Poll*, this could be interpreted as adding to the participatory element present throughout the exhibition by engaging visitors' eyes with the museum's architecture, which appears to also be the



Digital Image ©2011 MoMA, N.Y.

Fig 7. James Mathews, Installation view of the exhibition, "Information", 1970, photograph. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, U.S.A. (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY).

case with the set of prints displayed from floor to ceiling just to the right of the doorway.²⁷ Either way, the choice of placement for the poster reads as a deliberate attempt to direct attention one way or the other.

This leads one to consider another explanation that suggests a more strategic move on the part of the museum staff. As expected, the museum board members and their connections expressed discontent over some of the more politically charged works in "Information". Governor Nelson Rockefeller (1908-79) took umbrage to Haacke's *MoMA Poll* and demanded that Director Hightower "kill that element of the exhibition".²⁸ As it turns out, Haacke failed to fully disclose his project to McShine, submitting merely a yes or no ballot for museum goers to participate in without mentioning the question or Rockefeller's name. Considering all the pressure he suffered from the AWC over the poster and other various complaints the year before, Hightower likely foresaw the potential backlash of removing the poll and argued for Rockefeller to avoid the same by allowing the museum to serve its role as an institution of free speech.²⁹ If anything, this perhaps says less about MoMA's willingness to embrace institutional critique and more about Haacke's cleverness in infiltrating the museum.

Scholars like Julia Bryan-Wilson and Adam Lauder have raised the possibility of viewing this as a case of "repressive tolerance" as opposed to the museum staff taking a stand against their bosses.³⁰ One year before the protest, AWC founding member Panagiotis Vassilakis (1925-2019), better known as Takis, walked into MoMA and repossessed his *Tele-sculpture* (1960) from the exhibition "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age" (1968-69) as a demonstration of his right as an artist to remove a work that he did not want exhibited.³¹ Takis later distributed a flyer calling for the transformation of museums into "information centres [sic]", an appeal that would come in dialogue with the "Information" exhibition as an example of museums "appropriating the language of protest...to recuperate critical tactics *as art*".³² In his catalog essay, McShine redirects the attention of viewers to the aesthetics of the art in the exhibition and quells any antagonism by saying:

The general attitude of the artists in this exhibition is certainly not hostile. It is straightforward, friendly, coolly involved, and allows experiences which are refreshing....These artists are questioning our prejudices, asking us to renounce our inhibitions, and if they are reevaluating the nature of art, they are also asking that we reassess what we have always taken for granted as our accepted and culturally conditioned aesthetic response to art.³³

Rather than confronting the work of Haacke, Lippard, and the AWC head on, MoMA's staff welcomed them in an attempt to reduce any unwanted attention and responses they were sure to cause. Bryan-Wilson describes

this tactic as not just repressive tolerance, but an admittedly rocky attempt at neutrality on the part of the museum's employees to continue MoMA's mission of fostering artistic voices while dealing with their pushback.³⁴

Ultimately, the return of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* resulted from a combination of all these factors, demonstrating the complexity within which the institutionalization process took place. Hightower spent a lot of time during his early tenure as director dealing with artists motivated by the political protests of the era. Permitting institutional critique became a reasonable response, as well as a means to institutionalize the critique over time, as Fraser later put it.³⁵ Moreover, as curator, McShine possessed the power to allow works like the AWC poster to appear in dialogue with the rest of the exhibition, although little mention about the AWC or the poster appears in the catalog beyond a single reproduction placed within a collection of other images, minus any identifying text.³⁶ These various motivations created a path for the poster to return to MoMA, with even greater blessing from the museum's staff, for the second but not the last time. It marked another instance in this emerging defensive strategy for dealing with controversies in the years to come.

Assimilation Complete

The path toward institutionalizing the poster continued the next year in "The Artist as Adversary" (1971), an exhibition illustrating this very process in a manner similar to "Messing with MoMA". Curated by Betsy Jones (1925-2014), this exhibition featured works of social criticism ranging from 1863 to 1971. Jones presented war as the dominant subject matter in works by artists from all over the world, including 54 studies and postscripts made by Pablo Picasso for *Guernica*. The AWC poster appeared on display next to other politically themed prints like Jean Carlu's (1900-97) *Give 'em Both Barrels* (1941) and Käthe Kollwitz' (1867-1945) *Vienna Is Dying! Save Its Children!* (1920) (Fig. 8). The catalog notes that, with the exception of some works by Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), the exhibition was "limited to the Museum's own collection, promised gifts, or extended loans", making this the first exhibition to feature the poster as an accessioned item from MoMA's collection.³⁷

Once again, the museum staff allowed the display of this anti-war image within the museum's walls despite the continued conflict of interest involving its board members and their support of the ongoing fighting in Vietnam. The exhibition arguably doubled down on the message in *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* by featuring it alongside other powerful works that likewise revealed the horrors of the war, such as the photograph *Vietnamese Woman Mourning Her Dead Husband* (1969) taken by the British photo-



Fig 8. James Mathews, Installation view of the exhibition, “Artist as Adversary”, 1971, photograph. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY, U.S.A. (Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY).

journalist Larry Burrows (1926-71) during his nine years covering the war. Capturing the aftermath of one of the deadliest attacks of the 1968 Tet Offensive in the city of Huế, the photograph shows a heart wrenching scene of a woman mourning as she places a hand over the bundled remains of her husband just pulled from a mass grave. With Burrows himself having been killed in Vietnam earlier that year, the museum now displayed anti-war messages by critical artists and journalists who were actually dying on the frontlines. At the same time, the continued display of such oppositional images and viewpoints in exhibitions like “The Artist as Adversary” makes for an emerging pattern of conduct concerned with the effective normalization of objects of protest into the language of art already utilized within the museum.

The exhibitions that included *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* in later years all occurred after the poster’s 1978 accession date. In 1988, it appeared in “Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art” (1988). As in “The Artist as Adversary”, this exhibition surveyed examples of radical art, paying exclusive attention to American political printed art created since the 1960s.³⁸ The catalog, written by curator Deborah Wye (n.d.), emphasized the confrontational relationship between the AWC and MoMA by quoting statements made on behalf of the museum about the refusal to distribute the poster and commit MoMA to “any position on any matter not directly related to a specific function of the Muse-

um".³⁹ Once again, MoMA, as represented by one of its curators, made a self-reflective acknowledgment of its difficult history while promoting the political messages that its board previously attempted to avoid.

The AWC poster appeared twice throughout the huge MoMA2000 project, a set of retrospective exhibitions celebrating the turn of the millennium. First, it appeared in the "War" section of "Making Choices" (2000), which focused on the years between 1920 and 1960, despite having been made a decade later.⁴⁰ It then appeared in "The Path of Resistance" section of "Open Ends" (2000), which covered the rest of MoMA's history up to the present.⁴¹ By 2012, curators Juliet Kinchin (n.d.) and Aidan O'Connor (n.d.) created perhaps the most unnerving juxtaposition with the poster by featuring it in "Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900-2000" (2012), a "large-scale and synthetic effort to investigate the many intersections of children and design".⁴² Featuring propaganda art alongside toys, nursery interiors, and playground materials, Kinchin and O'Connor included the poster as they looked to illustrate how children all over the world "suffer from violence, exploitation, and devastating injustice".⁴³

These later exhibitions incorporated Q. *And babies? A. And babies.* for a variety of relevant themes, such as artistic political defiance, warfare, and victims of war. While they made references to the poster's history of institutional critique, they managed to weave that history into other narratives that constitute the overarching institutional narrative of MoMA. The context of an object's display becomes an important factor in understanding its function. The poster as an object of protest endures a recontextualization that, while not completely erasing its original political context of institutional critique, dilutes and transforms it into an object of art as it resides within the museum's exhibition history and collection.⁴⁴ Even exhibitions that took place soon after the AWC protest, such as "Information" and "The Artist as Adversary", arguably reduced any potential controversy by incorporating the poster and its critique into MoMA's narrative and public image rather than ignoring the controversy altogether. Thus, "Messing with MoMA" illustrates the culminating benefit of this strategy by making it possible to address, and therefore offset, controversies regardless of how recently they occur.

Critique in the Years to Come

This defensive strategy is not completely foolproof. In the twenty-first-century, the new movement for museum decolonization places considerable pressure on institutions like MoMA to implement greater museum reform and transparency with regards to their managerial practices. Viewed in a similar vein as the institutional critique of the late 1960s and 1970s, this new

movement continues the task of forcing museum managers to confront controversies that bring their accountability into question. The backlash from the recent “Theater of Oppressions: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011” exhibition (2019-20) at MoMA PS1, for example, mirrors the events of the *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* controversy fifty years later. Curated by Peter Eleey (n.d.) and Ruba Katrib (n.d.), this exhibition examined the recent wars in Iraq and the Middle East through the work of artists “living under the conditions of war, embargo, and occupation, as well as those in the diaspora, responding at a distance”.⁴⁵ While the exhibition received praise for addressing this topic, it also created another point of criticism against MoMA, as many of the featured Iraqi artists were blocked from attending the opening as a result of President Donald Trump’s (b.1946) travel ban.⁴⁶ Furthermore, critics denounced MoMA Chairman Leon D. Black (b.1951) and one of its trustees Larry Fink (b.1952) for holding controversial external positions in relation to the topic of the exhibition. Black possessed investments with Constellis Group (née Blackwater), a private defense contractor which took part in the 2007 Nisour Square Massacre during the war. Fink meanwhile served as both an economic advisor to Trump and CEO of BlackRock, an investment company holding shares in the private prison industry.⁴⁷

Condemnation of these individuals came in the form of open letters sent to the museum from both participating artists and veterans’ groups, as well as requests from artists to have their works pulled from the exhibition. In a move evocative of both the AWC protest and the incident with Takis and his *Tele-sculpture*, artist Ali Yass (b.1992) attempted to organize a group of activists to march into the exhibition and pull down his works. Their demonstration was ultimately preempted by museum employees who received word of this plan and removed the works before their arrival, leaving only a message next to the wall text that read, “This work is not currently on view” (Fig. 9).⁴⁸ The politics of this exhibition, much like all those that featured *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* after the AWC protest, failed to correspond with the politics of the people running the museum. While not providing a response to satisfy protesters, the curators themselves acknowledged the inadequacy of how Iraqi relations have been handled from the Gulf War through to the Trump administration, with Katrib writing that “the artists’ works and their subjects are a testament to the detrimental and ongoing entanglement of the US and coalition forces with Iraq.”⁴⁹

Looking back at MoMA’s history, it seems inevitable for this incident to one day be revisited on more governable terms. This readiness to do so distinguishes MoMA from many other institutions. Only two years before the Decolonize This Place protest, the organizers of the 2017 Whitney Biennial made their own attempt to institutionalize critique by inviting the artist-activist collective Occupy Museums (active since 2011) to produce an installation about the profiteering of corporations off of the financial

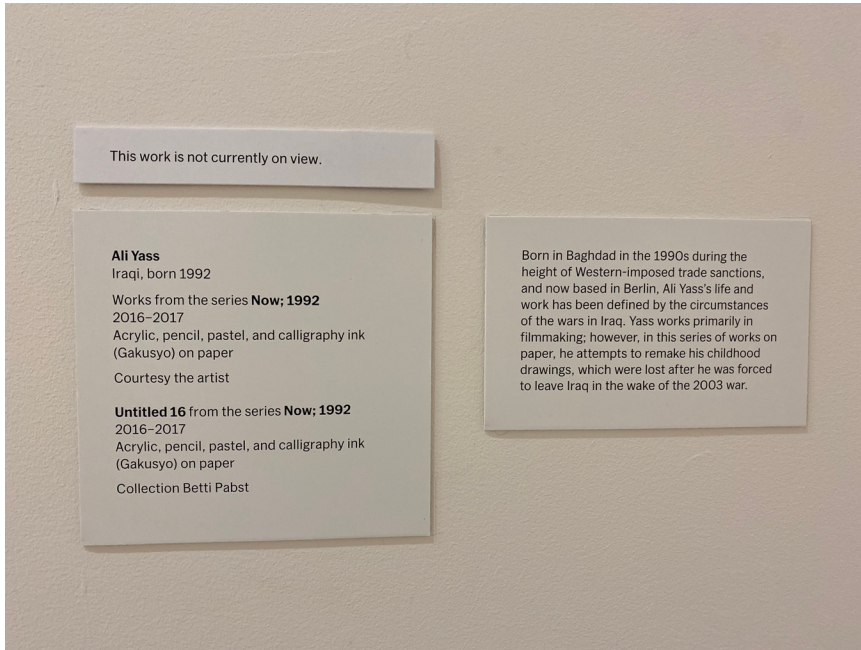


Fig 9. Hakim Bishara. Wall text for Ali Yass at MoMA PS1 that reads “This work is not currently on view”, 2020, photograph. Photo by Hakim Bishara for Hyperallergic.

struggles of artists, specifically calling out MoMA’s connections to Fink and BlackRock. The exhibition thus directed attention toward another museum to take the brunt of this critique despite the Whitney Museum’s own unethical economic ties from having Kanders as a museum board member at the time.⁵⁰ MoMA’s board, by comparison, possesses and even flaunts access to a comparatively self-referential history of dealing with historical controversies in order to ultimately institutionalize them within the museum’s narrative. This history suggests a preparedness to commemorate MoMA’s own role, whether positive or obstructive, in the reforms being brought about by the pressures of museum decolonization today.

Conclusion

From “Information” in 1970 to “Messing with MoMA” in 2015, the exhibition history of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* demonstrates its use as an example of radical artistic practice against war and violence, but also against MoMA itself. Even if one gave all the MoMA curators over the years the benefit of the doubt of genuinely wanting to make political statements against these issues and the museum’s ties to them, the institutionalization of both the AWC poster and demonstration remains undeniable. It exists not only

as part of the museum's collection, but as part of its history and identity as well. For better or worse, the scars of this and every other action or artwork critical of the museum become badges of honor. The museum's complex organizational structure allowed for some employees to wear them as early as the protest itself, in spite of the objections of others.

Complexity thus becomes key. Hightower's decision not to call for the removal of critical art during "Information" compromised its power to damage the museum's image. Artworks and actions like *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* arguably lose the ability to bring about any desired and meaningful changes, though recent trends show that such efforts remain persistent and should, therefore, look to these historical precedents in order to learn and adapt their strategies of critique. The continued display of the poster, along with the organization of politically charged exhibitions, complicates the way one understands the museum and the individuals who comprise it as a morally gray institution that both protests and indirectly supports callous political actions. Inadvertent or purposeful, this paradoxical defense mechanism made it possible to take criticism while simultaneously assimilating and institutionalizing it into MoMA's narrative.

Notes

1. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 20.
2. Museum of Modern Art, "Messing with MoMA: Critical Interventions at the Museum of Modern Art, 1939 – Now," MoMA, 2015, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/messingwithmoma/>.
3. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 1.
4. Lucy R. Lippard, "Biting the Hand: Artists and Museums in New York since 1969," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, ed. Julie Ault (Minneapolis, NM: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 84. Hightower had previously met with the collective in meetings aimed at attaining greater representation of artists on the museum board of trustees.
5. Nicolas Lampert, *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 221. The AWC Poster Committee was comprised of Irving Petlin (1934-2018), Jon Hendricks (b.1939), and Frazer Dougherty (b.1922). The MoMA staff members included Arthur Drexler (1925-87), director of the Department of Architecture and Design, and Elizabeth Shaw (n.d.), director of public relations.
6. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 20.
7. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 21.
8. The title of this image, as written in the caption for Figure 3, spells "Mỹ Lai" as "Maylai".
9. Lampert, *A People's Art History of the United States*, 223.
10. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart," in *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Matthew Adamson (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 145.
11. Alan Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future," in *Journal of Design History* 5, no. 3 (1992): 207-08, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/5.3.207>.
12. Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art," 210.

13. Wallach, "The Museum of Modern Art," 210. Wallach refers to an "Op Art Exhibition from 1967" as a "pathetic last gesture" by MoMA, though it is unclear which exact exhibition he is referring to. He also acknowledges the museum as maintaining some authority over trends in photography.
14. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Artforum International* 44, no. 1 (2005): 278. The importance placed on ideas over the finished art object by conceptual art also inherently challenged the emphasis on pure form featured in the work of those postwar artists that MoMA had promoted for years.
15. Some other notable examples of institutional critique from this era include Marcel Broodthaers (1924-76) and his *Musée d' Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles; 1968-72), which presented a fictional museum parodying the perceived distortion of value that real museums create for art, as well as Michael Asher (1943-2012) and his 1974 installation at the Claire Copley Gallery, in which he removed the internal free-standing partition of the gallery's back office to expose its area of behind-the-scenes operations to its visitors.
16. Susan Martin, "Introduction: The Left Turn," in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1965-1975*, ed. Susan Martin (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 11.
17. Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," 278.
18. Kynaston L. McShine, *Information* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), n.p.
19. McShine, *Information*, n.p.
20. McShine. *Information*, n.p. Ironically, two paragraphs after this quote, McShine thanks the artists on behalf of the museum trustees.
21. Andrea Fraser notes that early practitioners never actually used the term institutional critique.
22. Lippard, "Biting the Hand," 92-93. Nelson Rockefeller was a MoMA board member and brother of then Chairman David Rockefeller.
23. Lippard, "Biting the Hand," 93-94. The exhibition catalog presented creative sections for each artist that featured images or text by them, such as the rules to Lippard's game.

24. Julie Decker, "Climate of Change," in *Museum Management and Curatorship* 35, no. 6 (2020): 648-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1836999>. Kanders would step down from the museum board a few months after the protest.
25. "Kynaston McShine Papers in The Museum of Modern Art Archives," MoMA, 2018, <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/archives/finding-aids/KynastonMcShinef>.
26. "Kynaston McShine Papers in The Museum of Modern Art Archives." With all that said, one comes to question McShine as an open-minded figure while analyzing his own share of curatorial controversies incited during his career. When commenting years later on organizing the exhibition "An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture" (1985), which featured only 13 women (none of color) out of a total 169 artists, McShine said that any artist who was not in the show should rethink "his" career. Both his role in and words about this exhibition contributed to the formation of a new generation of artists-turned-institutional critics in the Guerrilla Girls (active since 1985), who described him as "completely prejudiced".
27. Other examples of participatory components at "Information" included John Giorno's (1936-2019) *Dial-a-Poem* (1968), which featured four telephones installed for visitors to dial a phone number and listen to recordings of poems, as well as the inclusion of Sacco beanbag chairs, also invented in 1968, for visitors to rest on while observing the art.
28. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 192.
29. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 192.
30. Adam Lauder, "Executive Fictions: Revisiting 'Information'" (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2010), 27.
31. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 13.
32. Lauder, "Executive Fictions," 26-27.
33. McShine. *Information*, n.p.
34. Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 192-93.
35. Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," 278.

36. McShine. *Information*, n.p.

37. Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist As Adversary: Works from the Museum Collection (Including Promised Gifts and Extended Loans)* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), n.p. This presents a mystery about the museum's official acquisition of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.*, which appears listed in the catalog as having been given to the museum anonymously in 1970. One might then assume the museum acquired it between the protest in January and, very likely, the "Information" exhibition in July. However, this contradicts MoMA's website, which lists the poster as a gift of the Benefit for Attica Defense Fund. The Attica Prison Riot, an event that kickstarted yet another campaign by the AWC against Governor Rockefeller, occurred in September of 1971, just a few weeks before the museum wrapped up "The Artist as Adversary". Perhaps the poster displayed in this exhibition and the one featured on the website, which lists an accession date of 1978, are simply two different prints from the same edition. This then raises further questions about which version of the poster appeared in "Information". Complicating this matter even further are the online installation views from MoMA's exhibitions over the years that identify *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* on display, but then redirect to the webpage for the poster where it is listed as a gift of the Benefit for Attica Defense Fund, suggesting they are all the same physical poster in every photograph since "Information" in 1970.

38. Deborah Wye, *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 7.

39. Wye, *Committed to Print*, 68.

40. "Making Choices," MoMA, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/178>.

41. "Open Ends," MoMA, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/174>.

42. Juliet Kinchin et al., *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900-2000* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 6.

43. Kinchin et al., *Century of the Child*, 215. Since the 2019 renovations at MoMA, the poster has yet to be displayed on a permanent basis.

44. I discuss this phenomenon in relation to MoMA's "Committed to Print" exhibition at greater length in my master's thesis, "Objects of Politics, Objects of Art: Three Studies on the Display of American Political Prints",

written in 2018. By exhibiting political prints of various themes such as race, gender, and war all together, "Committed to Print" became an exhibition *about* political prints while failing to sufficiently emphasize the political issues *in* the prints.

45. Peter Eeley and Ruba Katrib, *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991-2011* (Long Island, NY: MoMA PS1, 2019), 7.

46. Eleni Zaras, "New York City's MoMA PS1 'Gulf Wars' Exhibition Caught in Crossfire," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, May 2020, 48.

47. Zaras, "New York City's MoMA PS1 'Gulf Wars' Exhibition Caught in Crossfire," 48.

48. Zaras, "New York City's MoMA PS1 'Gulf Wars' Exhibition Caught in Crossfire," 49.

49. Eeley and Katrib, *Theater of Operations*, 81.

50. As part of this installation titled *Debtfair* (2017), Occupy Museums also held an unauthorized event at the Whitney that they described as a counter graduation commencement ceremony for financially struggling artists and students; the museum staff opted not to intervene with the demonstration.