

After the United States invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 and the killings of four students and wounding of nine others by Ohio National Guardsmen at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, anti-Vietnam war demonstrations grew considerably more violent. On May 8, a riot erupted on Wall Street between antiwar demonstrators and construction workers in which more than seventy people were injured. Similar protests also took place that same week in Washington, D.C., New Haven, Connecticut, and elsewhere across the country. Then, on May 14, two students were killed and twelve others injured in riots with the police at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi.

On May 18, more than 1,000 artists, dealers, museum officials, and other members of the art community gathered at New York University's Loeb Student Center and drew up a series of resolutions that included the call for "a one-day stoppage on May 22, of business-as-usual, a demand that all museums and galleries close as a protest against repression, sexism, and war." New York City museums responded to this declared moratorium in different ways. The Jewish Museum complied with the demands of the majority of the artists in a group show, "Using Walls," by closing the exhibit for two weeks, and the Whitney Museum honored Robert Morris's request to shut down his one-man retrospective two weeks ahead of schedule. The Metropolitan Museum of Art opted for what museum officials termed a "positive gesture" by keeping the museum open for five hours longer than usual on May 22, a gesture that was regarded as an act of bad faith by the leaders of the Art Strike, who staged a peaceful sit-in on the Museum steps that evening.

The Museum of Modern Art also decided to keep its galleries open and free to the public, although a retrospective exhibition of paintings by Frank Stella was closed for the day at the artist's request. The Museum also heeded the request of three other artists, Jo Baer, Robert Mangold, and Robert Smithson, to remove their works from a drawing exhibition and replace them with political statements. Members of the Museum's staff set up tables with anti-war literature in the lobby, and Erik Barnouw's film on the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was shown continuously in the theater (it will again be shown in the film series that accompanies this present exhibition). A black banner was flown in honor of the four students killed at Kent State, as well as those who had been killed in Southeast Asia.

John Szarkowski, then the Director of the Department of Photography, installed an exhibition of fifty-seven black-and-white photographs taken by photojournalists from *The New York Times*, *Magnum*, and other news agencies of the street protests that had occurred between May 5 and 9 on Wall Street and in Washington, D.C. and New Haven. These photographs were pinned directly to the wall, without any descriptive text. The dates on which they were taken, typed and enlarged on a sheet of white paper, served as the exhibition's title. Of the fifty-seven photographs originally exhibited, seven are shown here in the same manner.

From the exhibition:
**"The Path of Resistance.
MoMA meets Moderna 1960 – 2000,"**
Held at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC
2001-05-19 until 2001-08-26

The History of the Q. And babies? A. And babies. Poster

This vitrine contains documents and other materials chronicling the controversy that surrounded the creation of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* The poster was to have been co-sponsored in late 1969 by The Museum of Modern Art and the Art Workers Coalition as an expression of outrage at the My Lai (Songmy) massacre.

On the morning of March 16, 1968, United States soldiers in Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, entered the South Vietnamese village of My Lai and killed more than 300 unarmed civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. As eyewitness accounts later revealed, several old men were bayoneted, praying women and children were shot in the back of the head, and at least one girl was raped and then killed. By noon that day, the entire village had been burned to the ground and its people were left dead or dying.

It was not until November of 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published his extensive conversations with ex-G.I. and Vietnam veteran Ronald Ridenhour, that the American public began to learn the details of what happened. Once exposed, My Lai became the cover story in *Time* and *Newsweek*. CBS ran a Mike Wallace interview with Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers who followed Lieutenant William Calley's order to shove villagers into a ditch and open fire.

But nothing could prepare the American public for the photographs that would appear in the December 5, 1969 issue of *LIFE* Magazine. The pictures, some of which are on view in this case, were taken by Ron L. Haberle, an army photographer who had gone to the village expecting to document a large-scale assault on a Viet Cong battalion. Instead, his graphic imagery brought home the horror of My Lai, and would later be used to convict Lt. Calley for murder.

In late 1969, Haberle's photograph of a ditch filled with Vietnamese corpses was selected for a poster to be jointly produced by The Museum of Modern Art and the Art Workers Coalition, a loose-knit group of artists, writers and filmmakers who had been calling for sweeping reforms of what they considered a corrupt art world establishment. Much of the AWC's activity that year had been directed at The Museum of Modern Art, upon whom they had imposed a list of demands that included free admission at all times and the creation of a separate gallery for black and Puerto Rican artists. In October the AWC petitioned the Museum to close its doors until the end of the war, contending that "there is no justification for the enjoyment of art while we are involved in the mass murder of people."

Discussions between MoMA and the AWC continued, however, and at a meeting later that year the pro-AWC artist Irving Petlin proposed the creation of a co-sponsored, mass-produced poster in condemnation of the My Lai massacre, an idea that met with enthusiastic support from a majority of the Museum's senior staff. The poster's design would consist of the Haberle photograph overprinted with the legend "And babies? And babies."—the shocked question put to Meadlo by Mike Wallace in the CBS interview. By mid-December the AWC had secured permission to use the photograph. Union lithographers donated their services, and paper was obtained without cost. With the color plates completed on December 18, all that remained was the Museum's approval.

On learning of the project, William S. Paley, the president of the board of trustees and chairman of CBS, refused to commit MoMA to "any position on any matter not directly related to a specific function of the Museum." Paley offered to present the matter "without prejudice" to the board of trustees at its January 8 meeting, but judged it likely they would support his decision not to put MoMA's name on the poster.

The Art Workers Coalition proceeded to publish the poster, without the Museum's imprimatur, in an edition of 50,000, which it then distributed "free of charge all over the world," including in the Museum's lobby. The AWC also staged a "lie-in" at the Museum, carrying copies of the poster in front of Picasso's antiwar painting *Guernica* and holding a vigil "for dead babies murdered at Songmy and all Songmys."

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This exhibition traces forty years of socially critical and politically charged art, revealing that as times have changed, so have the forms and tone of protest. A strong emphasis is placed on prints, photographs and posters, with an additional selection of paintings, sculptures, drawings, artists' books and underground comix, ephemera, and an accompanying film and video series. The opening galleries are devoted to political art from the 1960s and 1970s, which tended to be more openly confrontational in responding to civil strife. The subsequent galleries examine the shift in the 1980s and 1990s toward art that is less event-oriented, and more concerned with the aesthetic challenges of representing endemic problems of racial and sexual discrimination and class inequality.

Historically, when art was made in protest, either on behalf of a particular cause or against a perceived injustice, its message was unequivocal and its impact immediate. Protest artists like the 19th-century photographer Jacob Riis, who worked in a reformist tradition, appealed to the viewer's heart and nerves by provoking reactions of fear, anger, shame, or derision, and offered clear remedies to social ills.

As the stairwell gallery of this exhibition makes evident, this direct approach has always been true of the political poster. Whether by rallying French students and workers to the barricades in May '68, decrying the proliferation of nuclear arms, or forcing Westerners to acknowledge genocide in Rwanda, these posters rely on bold, confrontational graphics and angry or satirical slogans to communicate a sense of urgency. So too do the printed ephemera and electronic media that artist-activists have come to embrace in recent decades. On view in the galleries are many examples of a trend toward making political art widely accessible through such homespun forms as t-shirts, magazine covers, grocery bags, milk cartons, and postage stamps. The theater exhibition charts the development of video—also portable, inexpensive, and easily disseminated—as a revolutionary tool of social criticism.

The Path of Resistance covers the years when the United States had become a nation at war with itself, morally divided over the deepening conflict in Vietnam, disillusioned by the cynicism of Watergate, and despairing of the riots and violence that made Reverend King's dream of racial harmony seem hopeless. To many artists, the idea of turning a blind eye or remaining impartial was intolerable. In *Cleaning the Drapes*, her photo-collage of 1969-72, Martha Rosler depicts a housewife too preoccupied with her chores to notice a war raging outside her window, as much a sly comment on the stifling effects of domestic isolation on women as on our wish to deny the horrors of Vietnam. In *Algiers Motel-Detroit*, his drawing of 1968, John Fawcett meticulously reconstructs the scene where three African-Americans were killed in a gun battle with the police touching off one of the worst riots in Detroit's history. Filmmakers and photojournalists captured

vivid images of antiwar demonstrations and women's and gay liberation marches, and bore witness to the massacres at Kent State and My Lai.

Andy Warhol joined the political fray by helping to raise funds for George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign through sales of his wickedly lurid silkscreen portrait of the Senator's opponent, Richard M. Nixon. The photographers Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand, who were less concerned with taking sides, were nonetheless drawn to the drama of public confrontation. Even Ad Reinhardt, a painter normally accustomed to the detached, self-referential purity of Abstract Expressionism, was moved to contribute to a portfolio of prints done in 1967 in protest against the war in Vietnam.

Political art of the 1960s and 1970s tended to be aesthetically accessible and readily understandable. This is partly because artists addressed stark events that lent themselves well to visual representation—cops turning dogs on blacks in Birmingham, or the torture of Cambodians in Khmer Rouge prisons—and took on causes for which there was the prospect of specific legal resolution, such as desegregation and equal rights. By the 1980s, the popularity of street protest had waned, and some of the most overt forms of institutionalized discrimination had vanished. What still persisted, however, were the painful and difficult realities of bigotry and intolerance, so abstract in nature as to elude literal interpretation and so deeply ingrained in our culture and history as to defy clear solutions.

Recognizing this, the more successful political artists of the last two decades have confronted these seemingly intractable, endemic problems by complicating rather than simplifying our understanding of them. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an openly gay artist of Hispanic descent who died of AIDS, created works that entice viewers with their seductive beauty and engage them in multiple, elusive meanings. Though the seven paper cones of his "*Untitled*" (*Supreme Majority*) (1991) seem at first glance to belong to the rarefied world of Minimalist abstraction, on closer examination they resemble dunce caps, or the spiked peaks and valleys of opinion polls. As the title suggests, the cones can thus be seen as an oblique rebuke to the demagoguery of the recent political landscape, or an allusion to the seven Supreme Court justices appointed by Reagan and Bush.

In the contemporary climate of hostility towards feminism, the photographer Laurie Simmons uses surreal humor to take hold of the viewer. Her *Walking House* of 1989 is a send-up of 1940s ads of dancing cigarette boxes, or a throwback to the 1950s housewife. Sue Coe's graphic painting *Woman Walks into Bar—is Raped by 4 men on the pool table—while twenty watch* (1983) does not simply evoke a brutal event, but rather implicates the gallery viewer as a voyeur and suggests that all too often we stand by passively when sexual violence occurs. Cindy Sherman abandons her characteristic playfulness in *Untitled #188* (1989), a

photograph grotesquely staged to depict what seems to be the aftermath of a rape, its victim a twisted blow-up sex-doll left lying amid the detritus of a wild party.

Numerous recent artists have explored the way culture constructs racial identity, frequently by evoking the way that America's racist past has deformed it. In Melvin Edwards's *Lynch Fragment* series (1986-89), four mounted steel sculptures gnarled to resemble torture instruments are a bitter reminder of Southern vigilantism. One cannot help but think the same of David Hammons's *Money Tree* (1992), a Sepiaprint of a tree with a metal ring embedded in it, even though it simultaneously connotes the elusive hoop dreams of young African-Americans.

In her haunting series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995), Carrie Mae Weems appropriates daguerrotypes of slaves and other old photographs and superimposes her own captions over them, calling attention to their racial stereotyping and inviting us to consider our own prejudices. Kara Walker's manner of depicting antebellum scenes in her 1997 etched glass canisters and prints is an unsettling blend of sexual rawness, violence, and, at times, subversive humor. And Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (How it feels to be colored me...Doubled)* (1991), in which the stenciled words of Zora Neale Hurston are gradually obliterated, is a powerful metaphor for how the black voice has been historically silenced in white America. Looking back on a corrosive past, these artists—and many of the others whose works conclude this exhibition—forecast a less than reassuring future.

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