

3

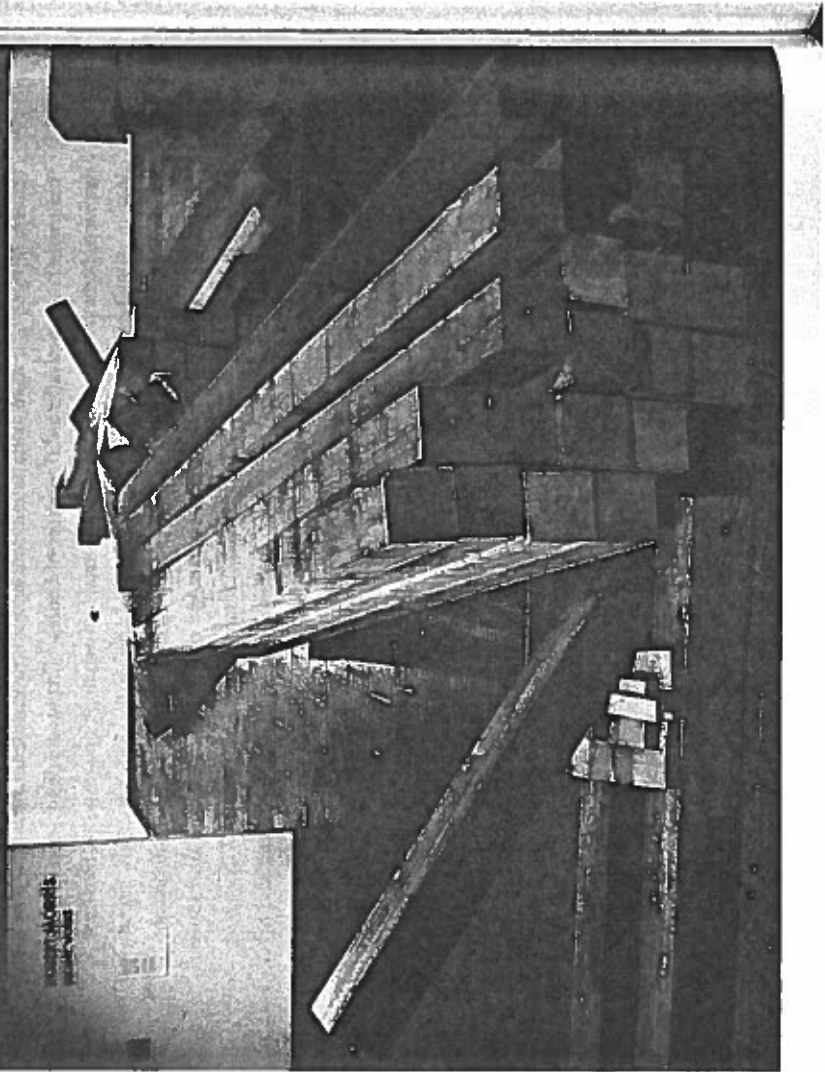
Robert Morris's Art Strike

in: Julia Bryan-Watson,
"Art Workers" (2009)

Exhibition as Work

For his 1970 solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Robert Morris: *Recent Works*, Robert Morris created process pieces—"spills" of concrete, timber, and steel—that filled the entire third floor of the museum (Fig. 27). These constructions, including a ninety-six-foot-long installation that spanned the length of the room, were the largest pieces the Whitney had ever exhibited (Plate 7). Assembled over the space of ten days, the installations were built with the help of a team of more than thirty forklift drivers, crane operators, and building engineers, as well as a small army of professional art fabricators (Fig. 28).¹ An article in *Time* magazine observed, "As workmen moved in with gantries, forklifts, and hydraulic jacks to help Morris do his thing, the museum took on the look of a midtown construction site."² To accommodate the massive installations, the walls in the gallery space were removed, and there was concern that the floor might not be able to support their weight. Instead of a traditional opening, viewers were invited to watch the labor progress day after day, although this component of the show ended after an injury pinned an art installer under a steel plate as a result of faulty rigging.³

Using machinery and multiple assistants to create large artworks was standard practice by 1970, and contemporaneous outdoor projects by Richard Serra (*Shift*, 1970–72) and Robert Smithson (*Spiral Jetty*, 1970) dwarf Morris's Whitney exhibition in terms of sheer grandiosity. While most artworks of this scale require help from



studio apprentices or installers, this exhibit uniquely theatricalized these workers' bodily involvement at the same time that it proposed an uneasy equality between artist and assistant. The pieces were made partially by chance—the workers rolled, scattered, and dropped concrete blocks and timbers, then left them to lie as they fell. In thus relinquishing compositional control, Morris insisted on an unprecedented degree of collaboration between himself and the workers who installed the show. He theatricalized the literal materials and means of construction work, and he enacted a work stoppage—an art strike—by shutting this show down early. By circumventing the studio and fabricating the work wholly on the floor of the museum, Morris figured the art itself as a specific kind of work, performed at a specific kind of work site.

The 1970 Whitney show was initially intended by curator Marcia Tucker as a comprehensive midcareer survey that would complement the artist's recent solo exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery and the Detroit Institute of Arts in late 1969. Just before it opened, Jack Burnham laid out the expectations for the upcoming Whitney show: "The Washington and Detroit shows have presented aspects of Morris's work during the past ten years; most probably the Whitney will touch on all periods of the sculptor's development in a more complete way."⁴ Both Tucker and Morris agreed until late 1969 to exhibit some of his earlier, well-known pieces alongside a small number of previously unseen, new works. But by mid-December, Morris turned away from this idea, writing to Tucker, "I do not wish to show old work."⁵ As he elaborated in a letter a few weeks later: "I feel a separate room of older objects shown somewhere off the third floor is antithetical to the position I take with respect to this show and the point I want to make about a redefinition of the possibilities for one-man shows in contemporary museums of art. . . . My hope is that the museum can support a showing situation which allows the artist an engagement rather than a regularization: a situation of challenge for the public and risk for the artist."⁶ By trying to "redefine" conventional retrospectives, Morris sought nothing less than a total renovation of the ideas of the solo show, one that entailed both "challenge" and "risk." He wanted to use his exhibition, not to solidify or historicize his reputation, but to push a political and aesthetic agenda. This was news to the curator, who had been proceeding with a catalog for a very different kind of show.⁷

Morris tinkered with plans for the exhibition right up until its first day. In the end, he decided to show only six pieces: four steel-plate sculptures and two new site-specific installations in which he subjected unrefined industrial components to a series of actions in which chance played a role. Tucker later recalled that the show required "more machinery" to install than she had ever used and that for the museum as well

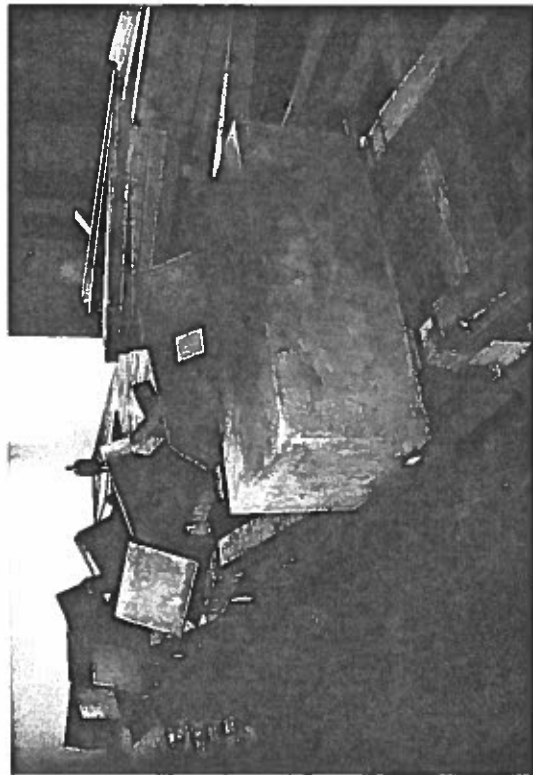


FIGURE 27 Installation shot of Robert Morris: *Recent Works* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1970, featuring *Untitled* (Concrete, Steel, Timbers), approx. 6 × 18 × 96 ft. Destroyed. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt © 2009 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

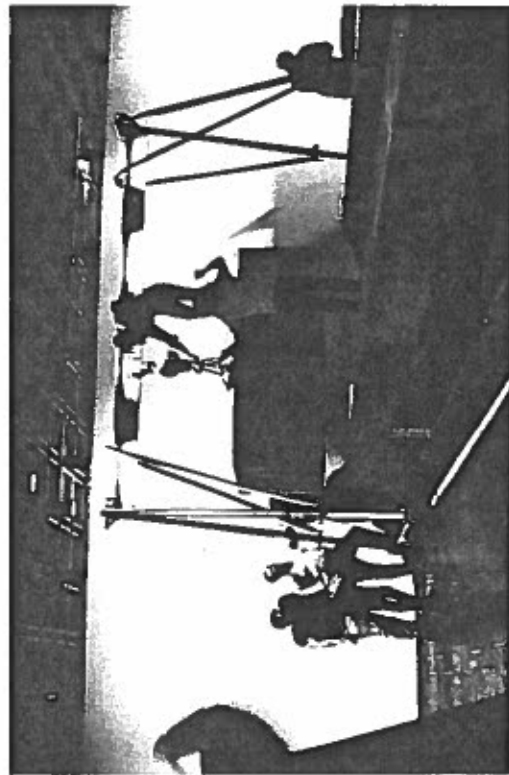


FIGURE 28 Workers install Morris's Whitney exhibition, 1970. Photograph by Roxanne Everett, © Lippincott Inc. Courtesy of the Lippincott Inc. photography collection, 1968–77, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

as for the artist, "it was an absolutely phenomenal amount of work."⁸ By filling the gallery space with raw materials that had been jostled, pulled, rigged, and dropped, Morris went to great lengths to *emphasize* effort while simultaneously denying conventional notions of specialized artistic skill, a denial that provoked comment in the press at the time. "What team of corduroy road-builders went berserk here?" one viewer asked.⁹

Within the discipline of art history, the phrase most frequently employed to describe the making of art is *artistic process*. Process encompasses the full range of artistic activity, from conceptualizing the work, to drawing in preparatory notebooks, to applying the paintbrush. Most generally, it refers to solitary studio practices. In the late 1960s, however, in concert with the radicalization of artistic labor as a form of work, *process* took on a more precise meaning and was applied to art that emphasized the procedures of its own construction: that is, work that highlighted the performative act of making rather than presenting itself as a finished object. This redefinition relocated artistic activities beyond the traditional site of the studio and moved art making into other contexts—galleries and museums, primarily, but also outdoor sites such as streets, parks, or remote landscapes. Such "process art" straddled the lines between performance, sculpture, and installation and did not usually result in a "final" object.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists increasingly challenged art's commodity status, seeking to remove it from marketability as a distinct and salable product—art was, famously, "dematerialized." The work of art, seen as increasingly irrelevant as a noun, evolved into an active verb, as was best characterized by Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967–68). In this work, Serra presents a list of infinitives that function to generate his process-based art: "to roll, to crease, to fold . . . to bundle, to heap, to gather." Process art's emphasis on simple "workmanlike" actions has as one of its sources the task-based dance of the network of choreographers and dancers who were affiliated with performances at Judson Memorial Church, such as Yvonne Rainer.¹⁰ Like conceptual art, process art was viewed as resisting conventional ideas of artistic labor, not least because it questioned the status of the product.

Maurice Berger has importantly theorized how *process* was a key word in New Left thinking as well as in the new art of the late 1960s.¹¹ This semantic parallel activates an understanding of both process art and the New Left as aligned with democratic ideals of open debate and interactivity. As Stanley Aronowitz wrote, "The nature of the New Left, summarized in a single word, . . . was process."¹² However, *process* does not adequately describe these artists' political understanding of their own modes of production. Artists such as Morris were starting to see their activities not only as

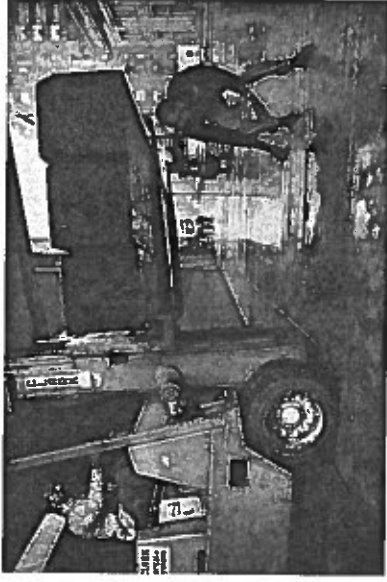


FIGURE 29 Robert Morris drives a forklift as he installs his Whitney exhibition, 1970. Photograph © Gianfranco Gorgoni/Contact Press Images.

process but also, polemically, as *work*. Morris's exhibition rehearsed and spectacularized this move to make process work and to make work process and in so doing made clear the stakes of aligning radical art, artistic activism, and artistic labor.

Morris's 1970 Whitney works are accessible today only as photographs, drawings, and written and verbal descriptions.¹³ Even though the exhibit generated a voluminous amount of documentation (photographic and filmic), a series of Gianfranco Gorgoni photographs, published in 1972, for decades constituted its primary public archive.¹⁴ Beyond documenting the exhibit, these photographs contribute to its discursive framing: in them, Morris is repeatedly depicted at work—gloves on, shirt stained with perspiration and dirt. In one image, for example, Morris drives a forklift, a cigar planted firmly in his mouth (Fig. 29). Gorgoni places the viewer down on the street as he captures Morris hauling large timbers through the Whitney's loading entrance. A man is removing the dolly from under the lift. His frame is contorted as he crouches below the wood, and the beams loom above his doubled-over body. Artists rarely drive their own materials in through museums' delivery doors, but the photograph produces evidence that Morris is adept at working with machinery and the matters of construction, a point reiterated in a 1970 interview when he stated that "a fork-lift truck works fine" as a tool for heavy lifting.¹⁵ In another image, the artist braces himself against a large wooden beam as three men scramble above him (Fig. 30). The faceless workers appear as dark silhouettes against the white museum wall, while Morris, smoking a just-lit cigar, is carefully framed by a large block behind his head. The depiction of the artist's manual and mechanical effort actively promotes the sense that he has become, as one review remarked, a "constructionman."¹⁶



FIGURE 30 Robert Morris and workers assemble *Untitled [Concrete, Timbers, Steel]*, 1970. Photograph © Gianfranco Gorgoni/Contact Press Images.

Morris's Whitney installations—*Untitled [Timbers]* and *Untitled [Concrete, Timbers, Steel]*—made extensive use of building materials. In *Untitled [Timbers]* (Plate 8), placed close to the stairs and elevators, wood beams from twelve to sixteen feet long were stacked in a grouping that rose seven feet high and extended almost fifty-five feet down the length of the room. Single timbers jutted out diagonally at about eye level at either end, wedged under some of the beams to hoist them off the floor. Buttressed by a few smaller slats so that they pointed at a nearly direct forty-five-degree angle, they were provocative, resembling fulcrums or levers awaiting the viewer's pumping hand. At one end, the pile cascaded down in a great tumble, fanning out along the floor. So precarious were the timbers that the museum installed signs warning visitors not to touch them.

Other gallery spaces besides the Whitney were overflowing with lumber around 1970. Richard Serra, in a show at the Pasadena Art Museum, placed twelve red and white fir logs, each sawed into three parts, in rows on a large concrete slab (Fig. 31). To align the logs, each four feet in diameter and more than twenty feet long, required cranes, pulleys, and a sizable crew of hired workers. Serra wanted to build a viewing platform to give visitors a better perspective on the enormous geometry of the work. Such installations, using the raw materials of construction and depending on teams of wage laborers, took the measure of the artist's own investment—economic outlay, man-hours, rented equipment, and bodily effort.

This bodily effort was emphatically gendered. As Peter Plagens, writing about Serra's *Sawing* as well as an earlier lumber work of Morris's, maintained:

The museum functions as a vagina, the invited artist as a penis. The museum, a pampered spinster by breeding, has discovered the thrill of getting herself roughed up in fleet-



FIGURE 31 Richard Serra, *Sawing: Base Plate Measure (12 Fir Trees)*, installation piece for the Pasadena Art Museum, 1969. Wood, 35 × 50 × 60 ft. © 2009 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

ing encounters with difficult artists. . . . The more difficult the posture (outsized logs in a *cul-de-sac*), the greater the burden (tons of material), the more critical the inconvenience (demands of manpower), the greater the titillation.¹⁷

Such an astonishing assertion makes clear how art making performed on an outside scale using heavy industrial materials was understood as the domain of men. This association went beyond the sphere of art making, as blue-collar labor like construction and steel work was steeped in a rhetoric of masculinity. The construction worker, or "hard hat," was seen as paradigmatic of both the "working class" and unbridled manliness.¹⁸ Plagens's comment, even as it means to deflate the grandstanding of massive art projects, reinforces overblown claims about large-scale artworks and the artists who made them. It ignores the many female artists making big art, while it also reductively figures the museum as feminine, its interior space a penetrated orifice "roughed up" by invited artists.

Morris himself has recently looked back at this moment, admitting the sexism implicit in the equating of outside sculpture, heavy labor, and masculinity: "The minimal artists of the sixties were like industrial frontiersmen exploring the factories and the steel mills. The artwork must carry the stamp of *work*—that is to say, men's work, the only possible serious work, brought back still glowing from the foundries and mills without a drop of irony to put a sag in its erect heroism. And this men's work is big, foursquare, no nonsense, a priori."¹⁹ The use of industrial procedures, or "men's work," cements Morris's repeated solicitation of an alliance or an affiliation with working-class culture, which is implicitly gendered male (and—the worker under Morris's forklift notwithstanding—racially coded white).²⁰

Even before the Whitney works, Morris manifested an interest in how the making

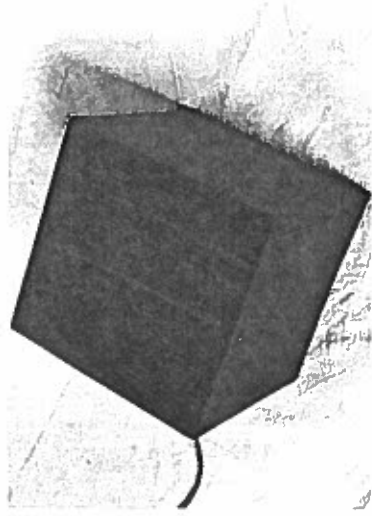


FIGURE 32 Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961. Wood and recording device, 9 × 9 × 9 in. © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

of simple cubes could reflect on questions of labor, take, for instance, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* from 1961 (Fig. 32). In this piece, Morris built a small walnut box, recording the noises of this activity: sawing, drilling, and nailing. The process took over three hours, and the audiotape of Morris's work was then played from inside the finished box. This in effect absents the body of the maker, leaving only an aural record of his actions. With the Whitney pieces, almost a decade later, Morris exploded the little box, increasing the scale of his materials, and with this increase came vastly augmented effort, a laboring intentionally, even anxiously, made visually available for the public and press to witness. As crews of workmen and construction equipment replaced Morris's modest saw and hammer, *Box's* simple record of making was transformed into a stage set with elaborately orchestrated demonstrations of physical work.

Likewise, Morris's *Site* of 1964 pointedly delineated the bodily politics of construction and minimal form. In this performance, Morris, wearing heavy-duty gloves and a mask of his own face, dismantled and reassembled a large plywood box. A soundtrack of jackhammers and drills accompanied his actions, audibly linking art making to construction, even if Morris's "work" here consisted not of building but of complex rearranging. As he removed the sides of the box, artist Carolee Schneemann was revealed inside, (un)dressed and posing as the reclining figure in Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia*.

Berger cogently contends that *Site* puts two forms of labor (sex work and art making) into relation.²¹ If, in Plagens's view, the "white cube" of the museum is gendered female, in *Site* the feminized component of the cube of minimalist sculpture is similarly revealed—even though, with its exaggerated role playing, that feminization is



FIGURE 33 Workers install Morris's *Untitled [Concrete, Timbers, Steel]*, 1970. Photograph © Gianfranco Gorgoni/Contact Press Images.

partial and compromised. Richard Meyer suggests that "while Morris's *Site* might seem to criticize the sexual economy of modernist art-making, it also simulates it, and that simulation bears significant traces of its sources, traces of domination, bravado, and inequity."²² In other words, insofar as *Site* is about the gendering of labor, it asks what kinds of bodily labor occupy the museum and gallery. In the Whitney show, with its all-male crew of haulers and installers, those laboring bodies are distinctly, even excessively, coded as masculine. (This exaggeration opens into more complicated questions of Morris and camp, which I have taken up elsewhere.)²³

The Value of Scale

While the elements in *Timbers* were importantly hefty—they weighed as much as 1,500 pounds each—the second installation at the Whitney was truly, impressively, gigantic. *Untitled [Concrete, Timbers, Steel]* was made by pushing concrete blocks on steel rods down two parallel rows of timbers until they tipped and toppled in random patterns along the steel rollers. A Gorgoni photograph records this process (Fig. 33); in it, four men pull with all their might, muscles bulging with the strain. The men stand between two parallel tracks of wooden beams and lean back with the effort required to tug the concrete. Just out of the frame of the picture is the concrete block they are hauling. We see mostly a chain of hands and arms grasping at the ropes—the camera focuses on the effort rather than the object. (Gorgoni's shot also captures a fellow cameraperson, seen at the right of the frame.)

The blocks were in fact a compromise: Morris wanted to use blocks of rough-quarried

granite, but engineers warned that the floor was likely to collapse under the weight, so he replaced them with concrete cubes. The blocks, fabricated by Lippincott Inc., had cores of plywood and were therefore much lighter than the planned quarried stone. At Morris's insistence, the wall text included the following caveat: "The limitations of the building—floor loads, entrances and elevator capacity—forced modifications to be made on all works shown. The timber stack was to have been longer. The work with concrete blocks was to have been considerably wider and rough quarried, irregular granite blocks of larger sizes were to be used instead of concrete. . . . Thickness on all steel was to have been greater. My objections to the design of many aspects of the building are strong."²⁴ The blocks, supported by cross-beams, were pushed along the tracks until they reached an unsupported area and caved in, tilting the beams up around them with some of the steel poles crowded alongside the cube's wooden cradle. At one end the blocks crashed all the way to the floor.

The work's very composition (or lack thereof)—unstable, loosely arranged, contingent—was meant to have a political significance; as Morris commented in a 1967 essay, "Openness, extensibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equality, directness, and immediacy . . . have a few social implications, and none of them are negative."²⁵ This essay, penned some three years before the Whitney show, provides a template for Morris's process work of the late 1960s, including his contemporaneous felt works. At this time, he was deeply interested in the properties of chance and gravity—the component parts of what was called *anti-form*.²⁶ Of all his art, the Whitney works go the furthest in demonstrating how, for Morris, this "publicness" and "openness" have positive social implications—ones that rest on notions of labor. As he wrote in an essay published just as the Whitney show was opening: "Employing chance in an endless number of ways to structure relationships, constructing rather than arranging, allowing gravity to shape or complete some phase of the work—all such diverse methods involve what can only be called automation and imply the process of making back from the finished work. . . . At those points where automation is substituted for a previous 'all made by hand' homologous set of steps, the artist has stepped aside for more of the world to enter into the art."²⁷

Morris has aligned chance and automation because they both deemphasize the artist's hand. This is an analogical model of argument: if his process is like work, it becomes work. Analogical and metaphoric thinking of this kind grew to be critically important as leftist artists like Morris sought to refashion themselves as art workers. They were *akin* to workers, and this likeness was meant to register their work's political claims. For Morris, relinquishing control in his process works expressed a de-

sire to have his art take place in an arena of social and political relevance, to have "more of the world" enter in. Morris's repeated use of the word *automation* is also significant for its registration of a turn to deskilling and machinic factory fabrication.

Many saw the Whitney works as ideal instances of "anti-form," a term that was itself ideologically loaded. Berger's work on this subject describes how *form* was a key word in Herbert Marcuse's widely circulated writings on progressive aesthetics.²⁸ In 1967 Marcuse gave a lecture at the New York School of Visual Arts, subsequently reprinted in *Arts Magazine*, in which he spoke of art's need to find a new way to model relations to the world. Marcuse did not prescribe what such revolutionary art practice, or form, would look (or sound) like.²⁹ He stressed, though, that all modes of production, including art making, needed new collaborative conditions of labor, stating that "the social expression of the liberated work instinct is cooperation, which, grounded in solidarity, directs the organization of the realm of necessity and the development of the realm of freedom."³⁰ Morris attempted to demonstrate these lessons in the Whitney show by seeking to initiate a type of meaningful artistic labor in concert with "real" workers.

The materials he used were likewise meant to have literal rather than symbolic value. Morris stipulated that all the materials he used for the Whitney show be acquired "on loan," that is, cycled back into the economy of construction after the exhibit was taken down. The steel was ideally to be sent back to its manufacturer, the timbers to their mill, and the granite blocks to their quarry. Substituting concrete blocks, which had to be specially made, for the proposed granite threw a kink into this planned closed circuit. Donald Lippincott remembers that the timber was sold back to the mill in Connecticut; he recalls that his fabrication firm kept the steel for future projects.³¹ Assembled rather than transformed, the materials for the Whitney show underwent no physical changes that would compromise them in future building projects. (Likewise, for his show at the Tate Gallery in 1971, Morris used plywood that he hoped would be recycled "for something I feel good about . . . given to artists, used for necessary housing.")³² The museum was transformed into a way station on the trip from mill to skyscraper or apartment complex. Morris further insisted that the economic value of the show be no more than the cost of the materials and the hours of labor paid to himself and the installers.³³ Since these works were never for sale, for whom was this "value" calculated? It is unclear how this gesture functioned aside from its symbolism. The works were designed to be temporary, thereby enacting a resistance to the commodity nature of the art object familiar during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a resistance taken up and extended by the "dematerialized"

nature of artistic practices produced alongside Marcuse's call for new forms of aesthetic relations.³⁴ To call Morris's Whitney show a simple instance of dematerialization, however, misses the artist's insistence on both raw, massive materiality and its "rented," transitory nature. The Whitney show was a concrete, even monumental endeavor, and hence of a different nature than "dematerialized" linguistic conceptual art, with its attempts to banish the object by turning art into utterance (attempts that were thwarted by the eventual institutional absorption of conceptual magazine pages, postcards, and so on).

Moreover, the word *dematerialization* was not limited to conceptual art practices and to the commodity character of art. It also pertained to the changing conditions of work in late capitalism. Marcuse used the word in his 1969 *Essay on Liberation*, arguing that advanced industrialism is marked by "the growing technological character of the process of production, with the reduction of the required physical energy and its replacement by mental energy—dematerialization of labor."³⁵ Thus the term itself marks a shift from manual to intellectual labor. In the Whitney show, these paired dematerializations—one of the art object, one of the emergent conditions of labor—inform each other, particularly around the question of value.

Part of Morris's political project in 1970 consisted of an attempt to liquidate the work of art's special commodity character *as art* by insisting that the only "value" of his pieces was the sum of their materials' exchange value.³⁶ Morris treated his materials as if they had no symbolic value; he wanted them to function in the realms of industry and construction (where they went back to be reused) rather than to merely metaphorize such uses. Only by materializing the labor of the artist, Morris seemed to say, can the object be properly dematerialized. He wanted his labor's value to be equivalent to that of the riggers and installers; thus he did not transform the materials into high-priced collectibles. The timbers, steel, and concrete would bear no trace of his hand; returned back to the factories, they would resist even the artistic aura of a readymade in a gallery. Nonetheless, these now-destroyed, "uncommodifiable" installations do circulate as photos; more to the point, following Pierre Bourdieu, the museum show itself increased Morris's own cultural value and is inexorably intertwined with the market.³⁷ As he performed this manual work, his "mental energy" and his status as an artist also fueled the economy of worth.

The Whitney show represents Morris's best effort to find new models of making and displaying art, and he hoped these models would defeat both the co-optation of artistic labor and the commodity logic of the object. The artist wants to reject fetishism outright (even as the process of making itself becomes somewhat fetishized). With

their careful, public deployment of physical work, the installations endeavored to retain—to depict and inscribe—the labor power that went into their construction. Much of this inscription was achieved by the art's sheer scale as it specifically implicated the space of the Whitney as a work site. As Annette Michelson put it in her 1970 *Artforum* review, "The multiplicity and strenuousness of action, the series of pragmatic re-calculations and adjustments . . . the hoisting, toppling, hammering, rolling of great weights and volumes produced a spectacle, framed, intensified, by the low-ceilinged, rectangular space of the galleries, animated by the sounds of hammer upon steel and wood, of chains and pulleys and the cries of crewmen calling to one another."³⁸ Artistic work as "hard labor" reached an apex of visibility with the Whitney show, and the frame of the museum walls, its very institutionality, proved integral to this spectacularization.

Although the two large process pieces formed the centerpieces of Morris's Whitney show, he also displayed four steel sculptures, three of which—the *Steel Plate Suite*—were set alongside the back wall of the gallery (Fig. 34). The works in this suite were made of two-inch-thick steel plates assembled with brackets specially designed by Morris and slotted into different geometric configurations (rectangle, triangle, I-shape). The brackets held the plates together without screws or drilling; thus undamaged, the plates could be recycled. The fourth work consisted of two steel plates lying at a slant on a low, polished stone column (Fig. 35). The *Suite* (in distinction to the chance-oriented, process pieces) was based on drawings, and a version of this series had been shown at the Corcoran in 1969; it was hence not uniquely "performed" as the other works were. Further, because the steel was "rented" from different local mills for both the Corcoran and the Whitney, the plates themselves were subtly distinct in each show. As Morris pointed out, "Steel doesn't come the same twice from the mill. . . . I like that kind of difference."³⁹ The name of Morris's fabrication company, Lippincott, was visibly scrawled in chalk on some edges like an author's signature. Although simply slotted together, the steel plates were also conceived to make labor evident, as they required ganties and cranes to rig them and hands to assemble them (Fig. 36).

Contemporary reviewers of the Whitney show were awestruck by aspects of the colossus; they mentioned the sheer mass of the show, the numbers of workers, the heaviness of the elements. Statistics piled up like so many rough-edged timbers. Michelson highlighted the magnitude of the steel and marble piece: "The weight of the steel in this piece was 12,000 pounds."⁴⁰ According to Cindy Nemser, the Whitney show cost the museum "an unprecedented amount of money to install."⁴¹ The

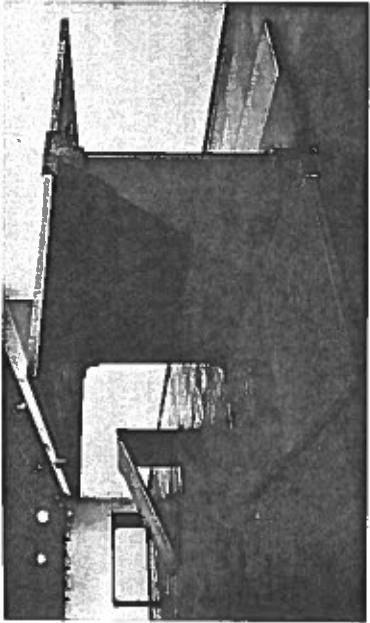


FIGURE 34 Robert Morris, *Steel Plate Suite*, 1970. Each plate 2 × 60 × 120 in. Destroyed. Photograph by Peter Moore. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

exhibition was framed as a Herculean expenditure of labor power and capital, and the installations' rugged monumentality—their spills, valleys, and peaks—lent themselves to classically American metaphors. For example, *Untitled [Timbers]* was referred to as “a great mass of the biggest timbers this side of the Wild West.”⁴²

More minimal in style than the large process installations, the steel plate works received little attention, except for a hand-wringing notice from a reviewer at *ART-News*. “Though these works obviously required machine labor to assemble, they are more dangerous than huge; they’re on a human scale which places the slab’s rusted edges right where they could do the most damage to a careless viewer’s forehead or shinbone.”⁴³ What is striking about this review is how it recapitulates the emphasis on art’s relation to the spectator’s body (a relation at the forefront of the critical literature on minimalism) and recasts it in the most negative light possible. By moving the confrontation between object and viewer into the realm of physical harm, this review makes overt the fear latent in Michael Fried’s influential account of how minimalism’s “aggressive” theatricality is an explicit result of its corporeal scale.⁴⁴

Scale became for Morris not only a function of perception but also a measure of bodily effort. E. C. Goossen pressed this issue in a 1970 interview with Morris:

ECC: It’s interesting that most of what we call architectural standards, like 4 × 8’ plywood . . . are really related to arm length . . . to what a man can carry, what a carpenter can handle. . . . But there are new units now being built which are much

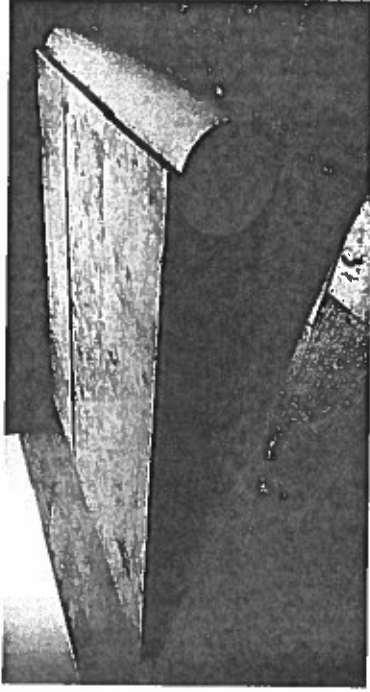


FIGURE 35 Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1970. Steel and marble. Destroyed. Photograph by Rudy Burchhardt © 2009 Estate of Rudy Burchhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

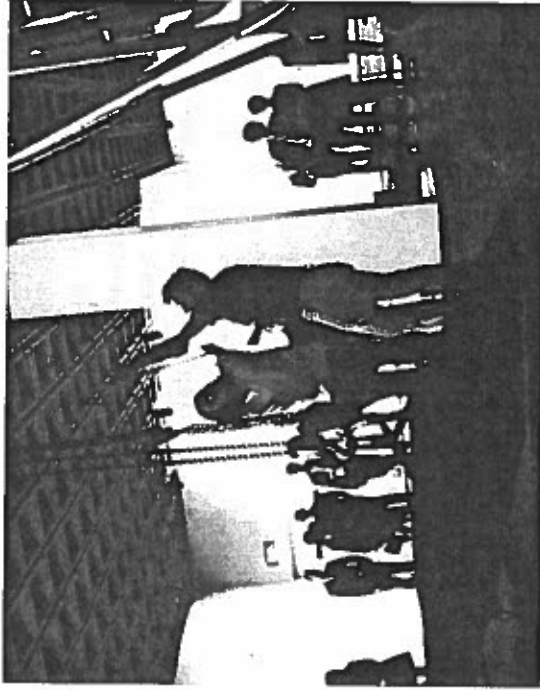


FIGURE 36 Museum visitors watch installers use gerritries to assemble Morris’s *Steel Plate Suite*, 1970. Photograph by Roxanne Everett. © Lippincott Inc. Courtesy of the Lippincott Inc. photography collection, 1968–77. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

too heavy to be handled even by a number of men because they're geared for fork lifts and cranes and other systems.

RM: Yes.⁴⁵

Minimalism is often said to have "activated" the body—the body of the viewer, that is—but this quote points to the ways it also activated the *body of the maker* as a worker. Scale, in other words, became a measure of how much work was done and whether the body, alone and unaided, could do the job. The larger the art object, the more work was needed—whether from machines or teams of workers.

Scale was central to the reception of Morris's Whitney exhibition. As Michelson put it: "No consideration of this exhibition can do without some mention, some sense of these dimensions and of the demands made by scale and weight of materials upon the resources of the Museum's space, its circulation potential."⁴⁶ Michelson comprehends the way in which Morris's scale entails an institutional component: that is, how scale seeks to put pressure on the museum's very limits of feasibility. What can the museum hold, how much can it support, how much flexibility does it allow its artists and its audiences?

Morris addressed these questions in literal and symbolic terms. First, he compromised on his materials because of fears that the Whitney floor would not bear the weight of his sculptures. Second, when he rejected a retrospective and instead used the exhibition as a showcase for collective, public physical effort, his show raised institutional issues about the kind of artistic labor usually represented in museum shows (needless to say, primarily singular and private). These ideas were crucial for Morris in the early 1970s, as he aimed to "go beyond the making, selling, collecting, and looking at kind of art, and propose a new role of the artist in relation to society."⁴⁷

Morris's exhibition took place at an especially charged moment in American history—late winter and spring of 1970—that must be tracked to fully understand what happened in the aftermath of his Whitney opening. During these months the AWC reached the height of its activity and influence, including its successful pressuring of MoMA to implement a free day in February. A brief political time line, charting a span of six tumultuous weeks from April to mid-May of 1970, further fills in the contested circumstances of Morris's show: the Whitney show opened (April 9), the United States bombed Cambodia (April 29), the National Guard shot and killed four students at Kent State (May 4), and, in a highly publicized confrontation, New York City construction workers attacked antiwar protesters (May 8). On May 15, Morris decided to shut down his show two weeks early in a self-declared strike—a vexed

gesture that stemmed from, and was implicated in, debates about labor and laborers in the United States. With this gesture, he became central to the AWC offshoot called the New York Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression that did in fact propose for artists a "new role . . . in relation to society": the role of the art worker.

Artists and Workers/Artists as Workers

"At 30," writes Morris, "I had my alienation, my Skilsaw, and my plywood."⁴⁸ A double meaning is implicit in this quote, which equally invokes art and the characteristically "alienated" condition of modern labor. Morris claims his alienation with some pride, treating it as another aspect of minimal art making, one that goes hand in hand with the tools and materials of construction—construction increasingly done with the help of manufacturing plants.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the art press and artists alike were fascinated by the use of factory fabrication, and accounts of successful working partnerships between artist and manufacturers were reported in great detail.⁴⁹ Finding appropriate fabricators was challenging for those 1960s artists, from the minimalists to an artist like Claes Oldenburg who wanted large-scale works. Contrary to the argument that much factory fabrication entailed giving up artistic control, many artists required detailed oversight of their works. Even as they were barred, in some instances, from shop floors because of union regulations, they wanted to monitor and in some cases participate in every aspect of their works' fabrication. Because union shops followed stringent protocol about who could operate machinery and handle materials, this was seen as a hindrance to those sculptors who wanted to step in and get their hands dirty during their art's manufacture.⁵⁰ The dilemma of artist-specific fabrication needs was partially remedied in 1967 by the opening of Lippincott Inc., the first large-scale firm to utilize industrial working procedures in North America devoted exclusively to making sculpture. Advertisements placed in major art magazines announced Lippincott's services and showcased some of its completed works. Other firms joined the burgeoning ranks of those that manufactured sculpture, a potentially promising area of growth for industrial plants otherwise in danger of becoming obsolete, such as Treil-Graz and Milgo Industrial, Inc.⁵¹

Overseen by Donald Lippincott and occupying ten acres in North Haven, Connecticut, Lippincott Inc. encouraged artists to build their works "all at once": that is, to work directly with the materials full scale rather than first perfecting the design

with a small model and then enlarging it. In a laudatory article in *Art in America*, Barbara Rose pointed to the unique situation initiated by Lippincott, in which "artists were encouraged to work on the spot, directly assisting the welders and joiners and making alterations as they work."⁵² (Here the *artistis* assisted the *workers*, rather than the other way around.) The firm became the manufacturer of choice for Robert Murray, Oldenburg, Barnett Newman, and Morris, and artists raved about what Rose called "the humanized environment of the 'factory.'"⁵³ The scare quotes around "factory" matter, because of its highly specialized focus on art only. Lippincott was never considered a true manufacturing plant. Although it often made editions of works (such as the multiple versions of Newman's *Broken Obelisk*), it was by no means an industrial setup primed to pump out identical objects ad infinitum. An exhibition, *Artist and Fabricator*, held in 1975 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, celebrated the close cooperative relationship between Lippincott Inc. and artists and repeatedly emphasized the firm's investment in craftsmanship rather than manufacture; it was "more a communal studio than a factory."⁵⁴ While the lines between artist and worker might not have always been clear with some large-scale fabricators, since young artists often work or apprentice in shops, the Lippincotts had a policy against hiring artists, maintaining a stricter division.

Although Lippincott allowed artists a unique amount of control over the production of their works, many chose to continue to work with traditional factories such as Arko Metal and Bethlehem Steel, preferring an "authentic" industrial environment. Not everyone was sanguine about the successful collaboration between artist and blue-collar factory worker, however. Some saw it as an undermining of "real" artistic work. As Dore Ashton wrote in 1967, "The beaming solidarity of workers and sculptors is certainly pleasant to encounter in the rash of machine-shop photographs used to illustrate articles on the new 'movement.' But it is a feature-story writer's fabrication, designed to elevate fabrication itself into artistic virtue."⁵⁵ Yet factory fabrication was increasingly validated as part of the sculptural process, even as the fabricators were marshaled into identities other than that of simple workers—that is, artisanal assistants.

The separation between artist and assistant was often blurred. Take the ad for the Lippincott factory published in the fall 1970 edition of *Avalanche* (Fig. 37). Here, again, Morris drives a forklift—a further demonstration that the work, while machine-manufactured in a quasi-industrial factory, still had some sort of a relation to the artist's laboring body. This photograph presents a nostalgic view of the kind of honest toil that was amply on display in the Whitney show and offers it up to prospective clients

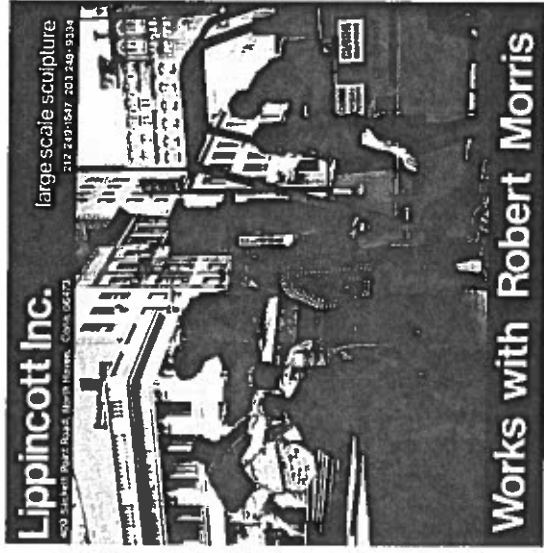


FIGURE 37
Advertisement for
Lippincott Inc., featuring
Robert Morris on a
forklift, originally
published in *Avalanche*,
Fall 1970. Photograph
© Lippincott Inc.

of Lippincott, suggesting that they, too, can participate in the evidently "hands-off" yet participatory procedures of factory fabrication. The ad is selling not the final product—Morris's sculpture—but a fantasy about inhabiting the position of the laborer. It is also an image that wants to extend the boundaries of the artwork; art is a process, it implies, that takes place on the streets as much as in museums, although the presence of the woman in the photograph codes it more as "art" than as the male domain of "work."

If the artist was authorized to slip into the role of the laborer on the shop floors of Milgo and Lippincott, were the workers, in a reciprocal move, allowed to inhabit the role of the artist? Robert Murray, who contracted with Bethlehem Steel to make some of his steel-plate sculptures and is seen in Figure 38 wearing a hard hat alongside a machinist, reported that at the end of making his work *Duet*, the shop crew gave the foreman the gift of a beret with a card that read, "Trade in your hard hat."⁵⁶ The beret is, of course, meant as a joke, and a good-natured one at that; it is a marker of bohemianism, if not slightly foppish effeminization. The punch line of the hat swap actually underscores the distinction between the artist and the foreman and demonstrates that when the artist becomes a "worker" it is ultimately at the level of the engineer, manager, or overseer.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were two separate but intertwined dis-

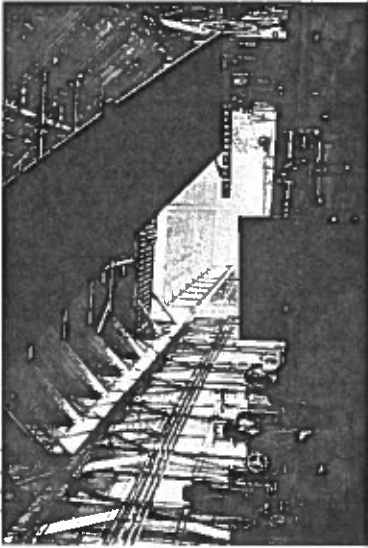


FIGURE 36 Robert Murray (left) works on his sculpture *Duel* at Bethlehem Steel Shipyard, 1965. © Robert Murray. Photograph by Baylis Glascock/Robert Snyder.

courses regarding large-scale sculpture and its fabrication. On the one hand, artists dissociated themselves totally from production, thereby claiming for the work the status of a manufactured object like any other; on the other hand, artists insisted that they were factory producers, with as much claim to the shop floor as the products themselves. Morris veered back and forth between these paradigms; in his "Notes on Sculpture, Part 3," he extols "repetition and division of labor, standardization and specialization," but then, in the same essay, he asserts that "specialized factories and shops are used—much the same as sculpture has always utilized special craftsmen and processes."⁵⁷ Did artists understand this new way of working as a deskilling of art or as a revival of the old-fashioned workshop? Or were Morris's contradictory claims an attempt to reassert specialized "artistic" skills in the face of the alleged erasure of the hands-on touch?

"Deskilling" was itself implicated in wider debates about the beginnings of the post-Fordist, postindustrial age, which saw the decline of skilled manual work in the early 1960s (although deskilling had been a main feature of the division of labor in classic industrial capitalism as well). Harry Braverman put the term *deskilling* into wide circulation in his 1974 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*.⁵⁸ In what is now termed deindustrialization, the early to mid-1960s saw a precipitous decline in blue-collar factory jobs in the United States (a loss of almost a million jobs between 1953 and 1965), while simultaneously marking a rise in white-collar employment; this wholesale transformation marks the shift to the postindustrial age. Precisely at this moment artists became interested in factory work themselves.

Process

Rather than viewing factory fabrication of artwork as indicative of the general shifts in the economy, some artists—Morris among them—saw it as part of a wider, self-conscious attempt to expand the realm of art into the political sphere. As noted, process became a central concept for this expansion. Morris stated, "As process becomes a part of the work instead of prior to it, one is enabled to engage more directly with the world in art making because forming is moved further into presentation."⁵⁹ In other words, art goes from the realm of the individual to that of the political when the process—the effort, the labor—becomes the art itself. Morris moves to make work the work of art. Like conceptual art, process art was viewed as resisting conventional ideas of artistic labor. As Joseph Kosuth explained, "The activity was the art, not the residue. But what can this society do with activity? Activity must mean labor. And labor must give you a service or a product."⁶⁰ Well, not really: audiences and art spaces alike quickly found use for artists' objectless process works. Process as a distinct artistic category became increasingly institutionalized with exhibitions such as the 1969 Edmonton Art Gallery's *Place and Process*, which featured, among other works, Morris riding quarter horses.⁶¹

In her *New York Times* review of Morris's 1970 Whitney exhibition, "Process Art and the New Disorder," Grace Glueck commented, "The process, to paraphrase McLuhan, is also the product."⁶² Glueck's formulation keeps alive the notion that in process art some remainder of the action might still be bought and sold. Clearly, the photographs are one such product; as mentioned, a prodigious number of images were taken of this exhibit, indicating that this might have been an event as much to be recorded as seen live.

For his part, Morris attempted to lay bare the constructedness of his sculptures within the museum. The artist put his own labor on display to demonstrate how the physical work of the artist becomes reified. To quote a relevant passage from Karl Marx, "Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity."⁶³ *Process* does not by itself adequately describe Morris's exhibition of his own modes of production—he presents it as work and himself as the commodified object of that work. As Morris mused later that fall, "The artist today has allowed himself, his personality and style, to be used as a commodity of cultural exchange. His 'professional self' is bought and sold."⁶⁴ Not that this work was universally read as honest labor; in fact, the Whitney show had mixed, if voluminous, critical responses. Some reacted quite negatively, particularly to its heralded move toward viewer

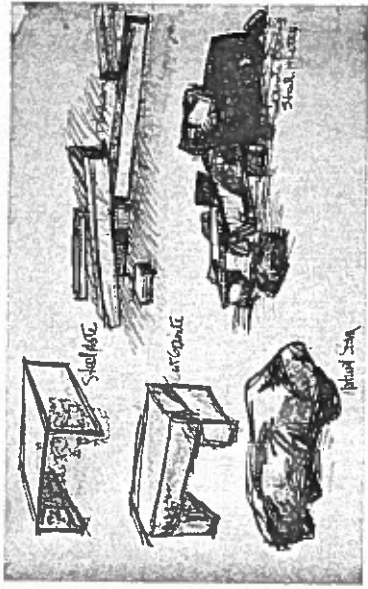
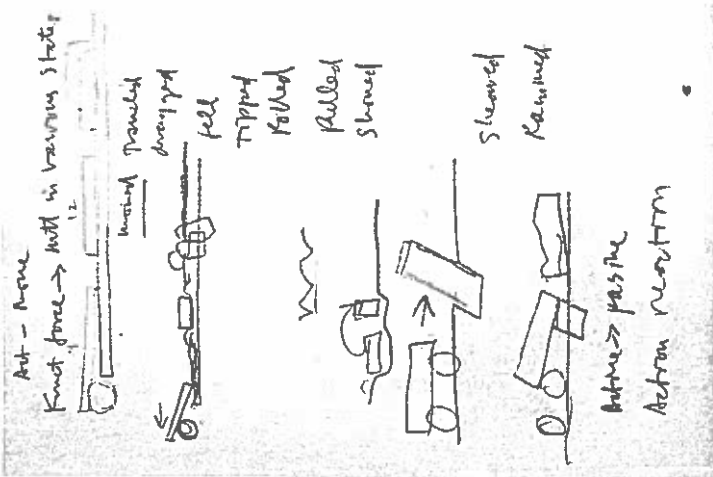


FIGURE 42 Robert Morris, *Untitled [5 Studies Using Steel Plates, Timbers, Granite, and Stones]*, 1969. Pencil on paper, 42 x 59 in. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by the author.

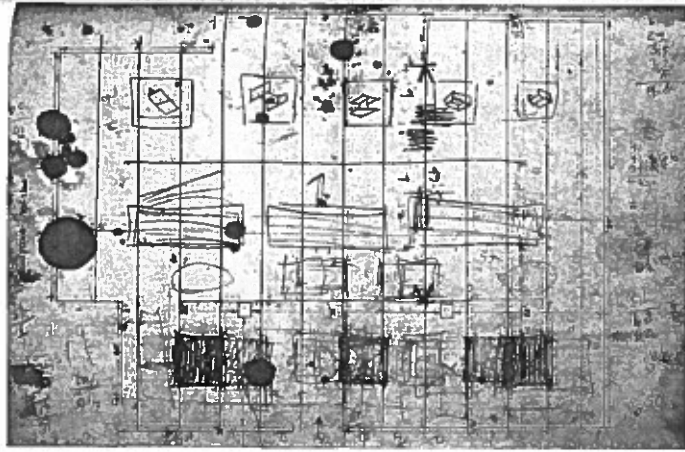
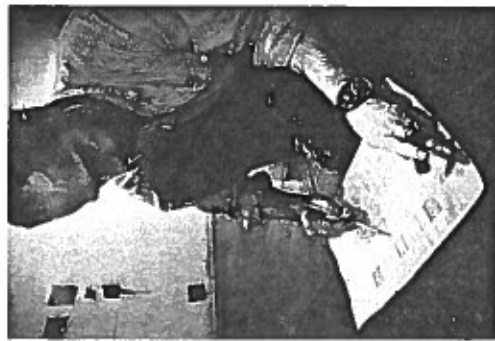


FIGURE 39 Robert Morris, *Act-Move*, ca. 1970. Pencil on paper, 8 1/2 x 11. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by the author.

FIGURE 40 To-scale floor plan of the third floor of the Whitney, with Morris's drawings and notations, 1970. Pencil on paper, 11 x 17 in. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by the author.

FIGURE 41 Morris consults his floor plan drawing, 1970. Photograph © Gianfranco Gorgoni/Contact Press Images.



pencil with its refined point contrasts with the gnawed and burnt ends of the thick cigar.

Given the absence of a real blueprint, most likely the crew figured out a way to roll the concrete along the timber and then repeated that process with each block multiple times along the stretch of the piece—although it was supposed to communicate disarray, it came out ordered. Another preparatory drawing in the same vein reveals Morris's interest in much looser heaps of materials (Fig. 42). The works' final regularity no doubt results in large part from the collaborative aspect that Morris was so invested in. The hired hands that worked to assemble these pieces did what workers are trained to do and rewarded for doing: they executed their task efficiently, with as little wasted time and motion as possible, rolling blocks down the tracks in the same manner over and over. (It is curious that Morris anticipated chaos to ensue from two parallel tracks and neat, identical squares of concrete—compositional elements that severely curtail possibilities for asymmetry.)

Despite the various appraisals of the Whitney show, the press was unified on one theme: Morris's public installations effectively merged, or at least destabilized, the positions of laborer and artist. In interviews during this time, Morris often mentioned his working-class origins and his persistent work ethic; the show went even further to secure this affiliation.⁷⁷ Here the vital, active participants were not the audience but the workers, and their exceptional visibility within the museum made it look "as if Unis Brothers had moved in with a load of raw materials for a construction project."⁷⁸ The trade that Morris inhabited was clearly specified: construction, which was in 1970 a tendentious and politically besieged identity.

Detroit and Hard Hats

A few months before the Whitney show, Morris produced a work outside the Detroit Institute of Arts that formally foreshadowed his Whitney installations (Fig. 43). Near the colossal scale of the Whitney pieces, it relied upon a similar process of collective construction. Composed in part out of chunks of the demolished I-94 overpass that Morris had spotted when driving from the Detroit airport, this found-object work was for him an instance of bricolage. He employed forty-ton industrial derricks to move the concrete, railroad ties, timbers, and scrap metal. Then, with the help of the Sugden Company construction crew, Morris installed his work on the north lawn of the Detroit Institute; the materials were roughly piled into a long, overlapping stack that resembled a toppled or destroyed structure.

Interestingly, some in the Detroit press focused less on Morris's art than on the actual laborers who helped to assemble these pieces. A reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* even interviewed the crane operator, Bob Hutchinson, who commented with evident satisfaction, "Only in America can a man awake a crane operator and go to sleep an artist."⁷⁹ (Although referred to as a "semi-sculptor" in the article, Hutchinson, it was revealed, had not been invited to the show's opening.) Not everyone was so pleased with this vaunted collaboration; Otto Backer, the construction foreman (also called, with some sarcasm, a "co-creator" of the art), complained that the work was "a mess" that might invite citations for zoning violations. Backer was especially unhappy about the prospect of removing the broken bridge abutment when the show was over; Morris did not stay to assist with the work's dismantling.

In the outdoor Detroit piece, as in the Whitney works, Morris invested in the monumental as a way to make labor visible. As he elucidated in his retrospective look at this decade, "The great anxiety of this enterprise—the fall into the decorative, the feminine, the beautiful, in short, the minor—could only be assuaged by the big and heavy."⁸⁰ Slipping into the realm of decor—problematically coded female and hence frivolous—would belittle Morris's enterprise to reestablish art's cultural necessity. That necessity can be located in the "risk" he mentioned to Tucker: not just challenge for the viewers but also the risk he took regarding his work's market value, given its increasing massiveness. Jack Burnham perceived the institutional impossibility of the Detroit outdoor work in terms of Morris's resistance to its commodification: "Last year Morris mentioned some of the problems connected with storing, paying for, and selling these goliaths. 'What do you do if they don't sell?' I asked. 'Make them larger,' he replied."⁸¹

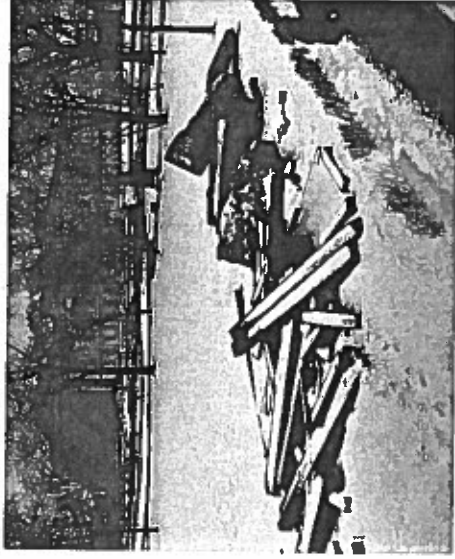


FIGURE 43 Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1970, installation piece for the Detroit Institute of Arts. Scavenged concrete, steel, and timbers, 16 × 25 × 40 ft. Destroyed. © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In fact, these works were to Morris mere rehearsals for much more ambitiously sized projects. As he proposed to curator Sam Wagstaff a few months after his Detroit Institute show, "I have a work in mind that is better, far better, than the one we did last winter and no more expensive. . . . Get one of those stingy steel merchants and crooked highway contractors to throw in a few tons of metal and a few tons of wet concrete and I'll make a work that will make the *Monument to the Third International* look like a wine rack at Hammacher Schlemmer."⁸² The proposition casually distanced Morris from the overseers of manual work, with its mentions of "stingy merchants" and "crooked contractors." At once recognizing the political import of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument* while also denigrating it, Morris, with his swaggering claim, implied that his artwork would assert its political significance in a way that Tatlin's maquette could not, primarily at the level of scale. (This is scarcely fair; Tatlin's piece was, after all, a *modèle*.) Here Morris measured his work's importance against smallness—such as an upscale wine rack—and asserted that his gritty, monumentally sized construction materials would leave the realm of effete decoration behind.

Possibly because of the press about the participation of a construction crew, the Morris show in Detroit was viewed as a rare art show that had cross-class appeal. Enthused one supporter to Wagstaff: "Don't know how you do it—but you've brought in a whole new audience to art—hard hats!—and made everyone stop and ask that crucial question (again): what is art?"⁸³ The recruitment of hard hats both as art makers (the crane operator) and as a newfound audience for art would take on special significance for

Morris's Whitney show. Who were these workers that were summoned both as the makers and as the improbable spectators of postminimalist sculpture?

In 1970 hard hats served as the paradigmatic emblem of blue-collar culture. According to historian Joshua Freeman, "By the 1970s, the hardhat itself became the central symbol of American labor, a role earlier filled by the leather apron, the lunch pail, and the worker's cap. . . . The multiple symbolic meanings of the hardhat were intensely gendered."⁸⁴ The hat itself functioned almost as a symbolic totem that conferred on its wearer associative powers of working-class masculinity. This was more than a matter of symbols; statistically speaking, women had virtually no representation in the construction industry before 1978, when the government began requiring construction companies to employ affirmative action policies along gender lines. A decade later, women still made up only 2 percent of the building fabrication workforce.⁸⁵

Aside from invoking clearly gendered resonances, recruiting hard hats as participants in the making or viewing of art also reflected a brand of antielitism familiar to leftist ideologies. Within the AWC, organizing as workers provided a certain leverage, since, as artists attempted to model themselves on other trade unions, moments of actual association with hard-hat culture were perhaps understood to literalize or bolster their claims to this identity. The crane operator's fantasy of class mobility was inverted in the *déclassé*ment of the art worker: only in America, one could say, could one go to sleep an artist and wake up a worker. In the context of the Vietnam War, this alliance between hard hats and artists proved, not surprisingly, untenable. It unraveled precisely around the Whitney show even as Morris explicitly invoked construction and manufacture as the basis for art's formal means.

On May 8, 1970, a few weeks after Morris's show opened, several hundred prowar construction workers lashed out at students who had gathered in lower Manhattan to protest the bombing of Cambodia. "War Foes Here Attacked by Construction Workers" read the front-page headline in the *New York Times*.⁸⁶ Seventy people were injured as construction workers, "most of them wearing brown overalls and orange and yellow hard hats, descended on Wall Street from four directions."⁸⁷ The workers proceeded to storm City Hall and forced officials to raise the American flag that had been lowered to half-mast to honor the four students shot dead by the National Guard at Kent State on May 4.

Now known as the hard-hat riots, the incident received widespread media coverage at the time and has become a flash point in discussions of alliances between blue-collar workers and the New Left during the Vietnam War. Some have used the assaults to validate the viewpoint that the American working class was a conservative,

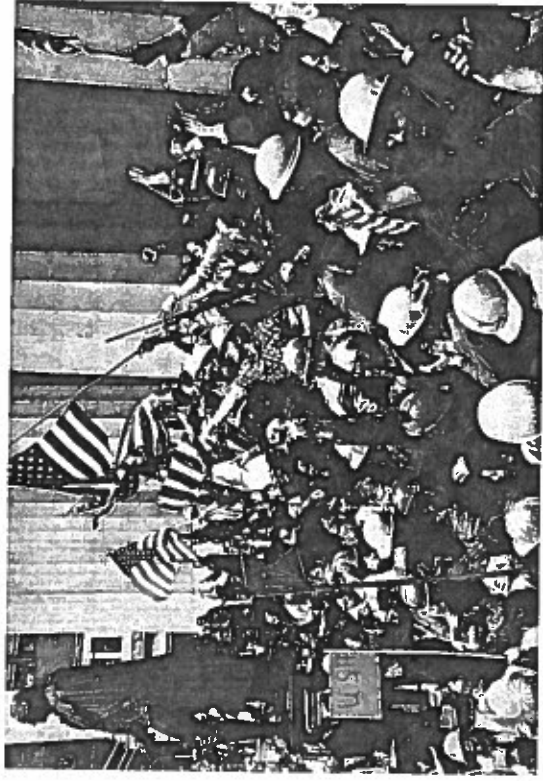


FIGURE 44 "Hard-hatted construction workers breaking up an antiwar rally at the Subtreasury Building," *New York Times*, May 9, 1970, 1. Photograph © Carl T. Gossett, Jr./The New York Times.

prowar force; others have asserted that the workers on May 8 were instigated by unknown forces, "managed" in some way by dark-suited bosses.⁸⁸ In any case, their identification as hard hats—in some way metonymic of a mainstream "American public"—was central. In the words of one construction worker who participated in the May 8 riot, "The construction worker is only an image that's being used. The hard hat is being used to represent all of the silent majority."⁸⁹ More than any other single event, the hard-hat riots served to redefine publicly the position of the laborer as politically conservative.

A news photograph of the riot depicts crowds of white men—not all of them in hard hats—massing together with American flags and hand-lettered "USA" signs held aloft (Fig. 44). This counterdemonstration was taken as proof that the working class—which, after all, was drafted into the armed forces in disproportionate numbers—was finally having its say about the war.⁹⁰ The building trades were facing one of their slowest times in the early 1970s, a factor that may have contributed to these workers' anger; many blue-collar workers were in April 1970 on the verge of a major work shutdown.⁹¹ Some at the time viewed the riots not as a bullying display of prowar sentiment but as a discharge of political rage due to a loss of economic power, as one proclamation put it in 1971, "The link between declining jobs in the construction

industry—as a result of Nixon's high interest-rate policies that make construction money scarce—and the hard-hat demonstrations should be obvious."⁹²

The May riots irrevocably colored the symbolism of construction workers. Hard hats became strongly linked to hawkish, prowar positions, an association that lingered even as labor increasingly turned against the war in the early 1970s, a move that was arguably crucial to the ultimate end of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁹³ Construction workers in particular became known as militantly conservative, and as photographs of prowar hard hats continued to circulate in the press and the art world, the hard hat itself became a marker of aggressive patriotism. For example, in a by-now familiar campaign strategy designed to show the honest, plain-folks side of the politician, Richard Nixon was presented with a hard hat by a coalition of union presidents on May 26, 1970. Although he was photographed wearing the hat, he refused to let the photograph be published because of the hat's negative associations with the worst kind of prowar brutishness. "Shrinks with horror at idea of hard hat," explained one Nixon official in an internal memo, "no hard hat . . . would never live it down."⁹⁴

Strike

The hard-hat riots were but one instance in an inflammatory period in 1970 that encompassed an unprecedented amount of protest and demonstration throughout the United States. In April and May 1970, the bombing of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State, Florida, propelled the antiwar movement to a new level of vigor. Even the Nixon administration perceived the difference in degree of radical resistance spreading through the streets, in workplaces, and on campuses: worried one official, "We are facing the most severe internal security threat this country has seen since the Depression."⁹⁵ These antiwar disruptions dovetailed with a surge of labor unrest. In 1970 the number of strikes by union workers had reached a postwar high; as labor historians have documented, "Large strikes were more important in 1970–72 than at any time during the 1930s, and the proportion of workers involved in them was surpassed only in 1946–49."⁹⁶ As part of what has been termed "the Vietnam era labor revolt," a postal wildcat strike in March of 1970 halted the U.S. mail in fifteen states, and record numbers of wildcat strikes by autoworkers shut down plants in the Midwest.⁹⁷ High-profile strikes such as the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, the United Farm Workers' strike of 1973, the 1972 longshoremen's strike, the 1968 New York City teachers' strike, and late 1960s wildcat strikes

in the auto industry led some union leaders to coin this phrase. And in April 1970, the Teamsters, air traffic controllers, steelworkers, various teachers' unions, and workers for New York newspapers held strikes.⁹⁸

Not included in this statistic are the vast strikes called against the Vietnam War, such as student walkouts (which climaxed the week of May 8 and virtually paralyzed the nation's institutes of higher learning, with more than 80 percent of universities closing), nonunion work stoppages to protest the war (such as those enacted by the film industry in May 1970), and the ongoing Women Strike for Peace campaign. As the *Washington Post* observed on May 6, 1970, "The nation is witnessing what amounts to a virtual general and uncoordinated strike."⁹⁹ In his comprehensive account of the antiwar movement, Tom Wells contended that in May 1970 "the antiwar movement was alive as never before. The political possibilities seemed stupendous. A truly general strike against the war was not inconceivable—just shut the whole country down."¹⁰⁰

Artists were swept up by the promise of work stoppages, walkouts, and boycotts as well. On May 13, in New York, the artists in the Jewish Museum group show *Using Walls* voted to close the show to protest the U.S. government's escalating violence in Southeast Asia and on campuses.¹⁰¹ Morris participated in this show and the subsequent shutdown; inspired by the forceful message of artistic blackout, he decided to dismantle his Whitney show several weeks early. As a prominent artist who had just launched a major solo show that mimed the procedures of construction and hence provided fresh evidence for the art worker's self-descriptor, Morris was uniquely positioned to capitalize on the ethics of mass shutdown. On May 15 he sent a notice to the Whitney Museum demanding that his show be ended immediately, stating, "This act of closing . . . a cultural institution is intended to underscore the need I and others feel to shift priorities at this time from art making and viewing to unified action within the art community against the intensifying conditions of repression, war and racism in this country."¹⁰² He declared himself "on strike" against the art system and further demanded that the Whitney close for two weeks to hold meetings for the art community, to address both the war and a general dissatisfaction with the art museum as an agent of power. In Morris's view, "A reassessment of the art structure itself seems timely—its values, its policies, its modes of control, its economic presumptions, its hierarchy of existing power and administration." The Whitney administration at first refused his request, but after Morris threatened to use the museum as a site for a massive sit-in, it acquiesced and closed the show on May 17.

Morris's demand was a stunning instance of an artist using the polemical language

of the strike for political purposes. While it echoed the 1937 Artists' Union strike, Morris's strike was not a campaign about wages or working conditions.¹⁰³ Although not involved with the AWC, Morris was propelled to the forefront of New York artistic activist circles when he shut down his Whitney retrospective. The day after his show was closed, concerned artists held a meeting at New York University's Loeb Center to discuss what they could do to protest the bombings of Cambodia. Over one thousand people attended, and "Robert Morris, Robert Morris, Robert Morris was the name on everyone's lips."¹⁰⁴ He was elected chairman of an offshoot of the AWC known as the New York Art Strike against Racism, War, and Repression. (Poppy Johnson, in a gesture of gender conciliation, was elected co-chair.)¹⁰⁵

The Art Strike was by no means unified about its overall strategy or how overarching artists' withdrawal should be. Some pressed for the cessation of all art except antiwar protest art—a surprisingly popular view and one Morris evidently endorsed as he asserted that abstract art was racist and bourgeois and should possibly be stopped.¹⁰⁶ "If art can't help the revolution, get rid of it," proclaimed one anonymous poster created during the Art Strike.¹⁰⁷ Some articulated the belief that art making should be stopped in favor of reaching out to the proletariat. As Nemser reported, some artists (she does not name them) "demanded that artists make works that could be used as propaganda to unite the artists with the workers."¹⁰⁸ This proposal, seen as a call for old-fashioned social realism, was roundly rejected, and not only because artists were looking for wholly unprecedented aesthetic models for political artistic practice. The invocation of "the workers" was also challenged: "Mention of the workers had driven a frantic Ivan Karp to the podium. Wringing his hands, he reminded the hotheads of what the construction men had done to the students only a week before. 'Remember who your enemies really are,' he implored."¹⁰⁹ In short, hard hats had gone, in the space of a few weeks, from idealized participants in artists' efforts to democratize their practices to a force aligned with their enemies.

Artists at the meeting ratified a motion about the efficacy of an art strike. They demanded that New York museums shut down on May 22, seeking to stop business as usual for one day as a gesture of protest against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Some museums and galleries agreed to close their doors. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which failed to do so, was picketed by a group of several hundred artists, led by Morris and Johnson, who acted as spokespersons for the event (Fig. 45). At its peak, its ranks swelled to over five hundred artists who remained on the picket line for hours in defiance of the Metropolitan's contrary decision to stay open late.

Photos of the Art Strike, taken by Jan van Raay, depict the steps of the Metropol-

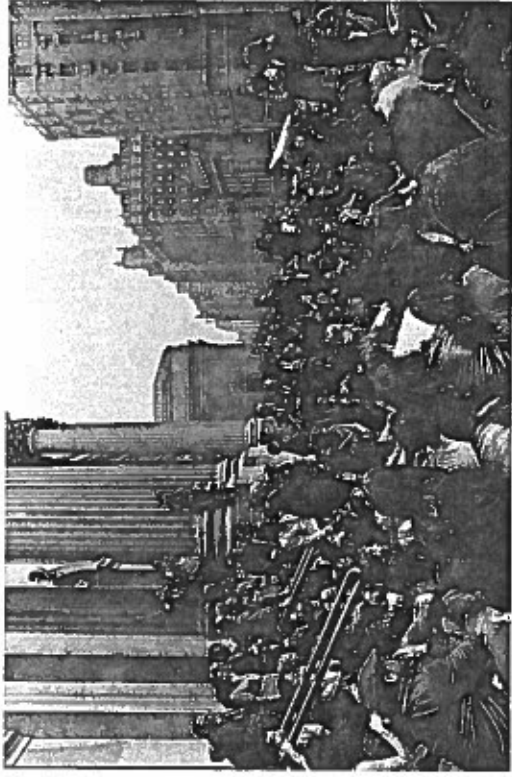


FIGURE 45 Robert Morris cups his hands around his mouth to be heard as he is handed a bullhorn on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum during the May 22, 1970, New York Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression. Poppy Johnson stands beside him. Photograph © Jan van Raay.

itan Museum thick with protesting artists, their black-and-white posters lined up like shields (Fig. 46). With its unified, monochromatic, text-only graphics—recalling the pared-down aesthetics of conceptualism and invoking a Kosuth language piece—the Art Strike seemed to one observer to be "put into action like a new kind of ARTFORM."¹¹⁰ Many of the images position Morris at the center of the event—pointing accusingly at the museum, for instance, or addressing the crowd and being handed a makeshift bullhorn as Johnson flanks him. In other photos, however, different characters are foregrounded. For instance, artist Art Coppedge raises a revolutionary fist as he stands next to assistant director Joseph Noble, whose suit and bitter expression mark him immediately as the "establishment" antagonist (Fig. 47). Coppedge was an active member in the branch of the AWC that sought equal representation in museums for black and Puerto Rican artists, and his strident gesture is an active reminder that in fact the Art Strike put "racism" before "war" in its title. The strike's confrontational attitude was not just with the museum power elite; as Therese Schwartz and Bill Amidon reported, "One smiling, amiable construction worker talked to two artists. He remained unconvinced, defended his prosperity and good job, saying that he wasn't being persecuted. More construction workers who worked in the museum were allowed in, followed by the chant: 'construction

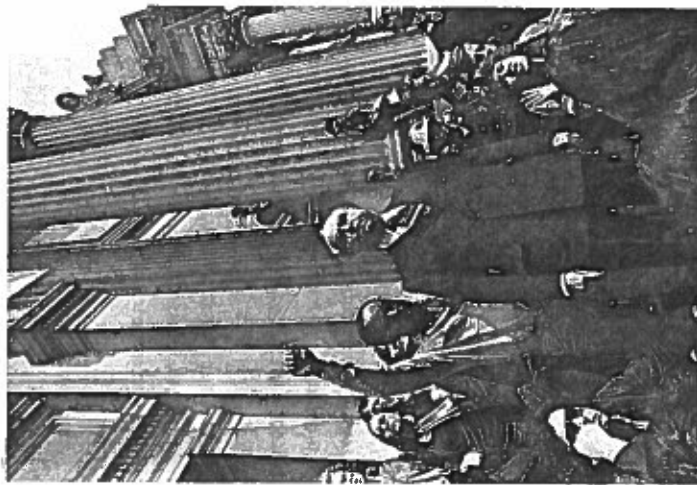
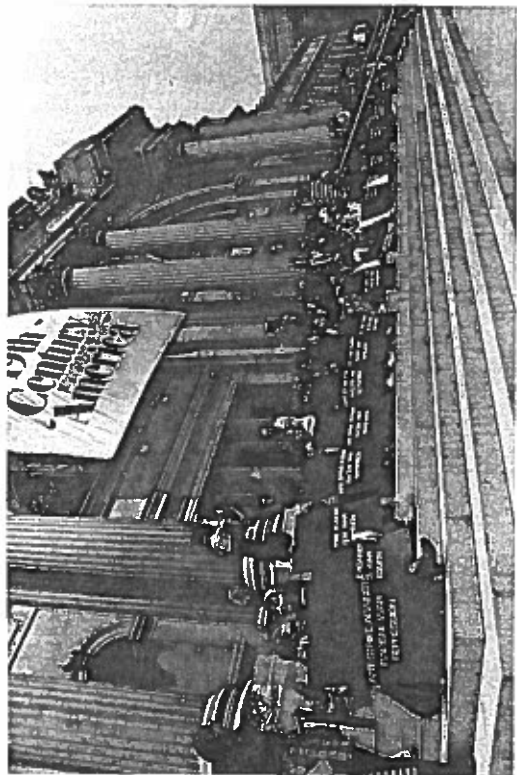


FIGURE 46 On the steps of the Met, uniform text-only posters are wielded by protesters at the Art Strike, 1970. Photograph © Jan van Raay.

FIGURE 47 Art Striker Art Coppedge raises a defiant fist as he stands next to Metropolitan Museum administrator Joseph Veatch Noble, May 22, 1970. Photograph © Jan van Raay.

workers, join us!"¹¹¹ This hopeful chant of solidarity fell on deaf ears; still, Andre, in his worker's coveralls, swept the stairs with satisfaction when the event was declared over, and the strike was deemed a success.

Throughout this spring, strike sentiment among artists gained momentum. The International Cultural Revolutionary Forces (consisting of GAAG founders Hendricks and Toche, along with occasional others) took the notion of a strike quite literally, calling for "all artists to stop producing art, and become political and social activists."¹¹² (At an earlier meeting of the AWC in 1969, Lee Lozano, foreshadowing the language of the Art Strike, launched her "General Strike Piece" by declaring her withdrawal from all art world functions in order to undergo total "personal revolution.") Artist and critic Irving Petlin declared that artists should participate in the "waves of strikes, calls, interruptions, demands, non-cooperation, sabotage, resistance, by no business as usual anywhere." He called on artists to "withhold their work, deny its use to a government anxious to signal to the world that it represents a civilized, culturally-centered society while melting babies in Vietnam. No."¹¹³ While artists as image makers were positioned take an active part in the battle of images being fought about the popularity of the war, many chose instead to stop showing their work. Jo Baer and Robert Mangold removed the works they had on view at the MoMA for the month of May to protest the Cambodia bombings, and Frank Stella closed his MoMA solo exhibition for the day of the Art Strike.

Those taking part in the strike went under the assumption that aesthetic practices were *productive* and that their stoppage would interrupt the functions of economic or social life in some crucial way. The Art Strike, reliant upon the space of the art institution, is a sign of how the art workers had moved from thinking that "work" consisted of physical making in the studio to understanding that "work" occurred when art was on display, in the realm of viewership. As much as the strike was a rhetorical gesture, it was also meant to signal alliances with the conventional strikes as well as the student strikes that were energizing the antiwar movement. The Art Strike raised significant questions about the viability of the "art worker" identity, given that with art there is no consolidated employer, nor is there a factory line to halt. These questions had serious implications as artists sought the most effective means to enact reforms within their "work sites"—museums and galleries. Because it sought to dissuade visitors from entering art institutions, the Art Strike might more accurately be termed a boycott. Still, it drew on the rhetoric of the general strike and the moratorium, which in their most radical forms went beyond protests of working conditions to gestures that sought nothing less than revolution.

It might be tempting to read the Art Strike as the culmination of a conceptual strategy—the logical conclusion of Morris's "dematerialization." Such a reading ignores the political context—the labor revolt—within which the Art Strike and the closure of the Whitney show occurred. As part of the rising tide of strikes engulfing the nation, the Art Strike used the motif of work stoppage as a galvanizing practice to embrace a range of issues. If, in this sense, the Art Strike could be described as a conceptual performance, it was at the same time a performative act aimed at political intervention.

Morris's tactic of withholding his artistic labor by shutting down his Whitney show early could also be read as a form of aesthetic refusal much influenced by Marcuse's theory of a "Great Refusal"—"the negation of the entire Establishment."¹¹⁴ The Great Refusal, the possibility of imagining alternatives to the "massive exploitative power of corporate capitalism,"¹¹⁵ was most expansively outlined in Marcuse's 1969 *Essay on Liberation*, a book that was highly influential for the New York art Left.¹¹⁶ In the late 1960s Marcuse saw hopeful indications that this refusal was undermining mainstream society, especially in the widespread "collapse of work discipline, slowdown, spread of disobedience to rules and regulations, wildcat strikes, boycotts, sabotage, gratuitous acts of noncompliance."¹¹⁷ Morris took his theory of artistic negation directly from Marcuse's theories, as seen in the following statement made by Morris about 1970: "My first principle fog political action, as well as art action, is denial and negation. One says no. It is enough at this point to begin by saying no."¹¹⁸

In 1970 posters and antiwar art struck artists as less and less relevant, and withdrawal—a refusal to let things proceed as normal—took over as a popular protest strategy. As Lucy Lippard put it, "It's how you give and withhold your art that is political."¹¹⁹ But some criticized the Art Strike as flawed in design and motive and dismissed its calls for the withdrawal of art as ineffectual. In June 1970 a small group of art strikers, including Morris, met with Senators Jacob Javits and Claiborne Pell of the Senate Subcommittee on Arts and Humanities in Washington, D.C., to discuss the ramifications of removing art from state-sponsored exhibitions. The senators were unmoved and commented that if the strike had involved doctors or other types of workers deemed "necessary" for society to function, their withholding of labor would be a different matter.¹²⁰ Others saw the strike as a threat. Said John High-tower, then-director of MoMA, "The irony of conducting a strike against arts institutions is that it puts you in the same position of Hitler in the 30s and 40s, Stalin in the 50s."¹²¹ Hardly: the Art Strike did not advocate the complete closing of all museums but, along with the AWC, pushed to make museums more widely accessible.

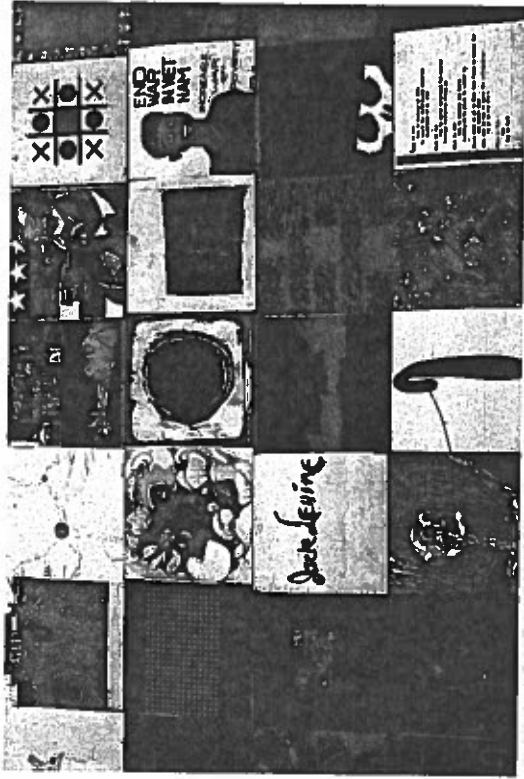


PLATE 1 Panels for the Pearce Tower (detail), Los Angeles, 1966. Mixed media. Photograph by Charles Brittin. Charles Brittin Archive. Research Library, Getty Research Institute. Used with permission (2005.M.11)



PLATE 2 Artists Poster Committee (Frazier Dougherty, Jon Hendricks, Irving Peilin). *Art Strike*. Lithograph, 25 x 38 in. Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. Photograph by Ron L. Haeberte.

PLATE 3 Art Workers' Coalition, *At Attica and at the Modern, Rockefeller Calls the Shots*, 1971. Poster, silkscreen on paper. Image courtesy of the Lucy R. Lippard Papers, ca. 1940-2006. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

AT ATTICA
and at the Modern
ROCKEFELLER
CALLS THE SHOTS AC 7

PLATE 4 Carl Andre, *37 Pieces of Work*, 1969. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Aluminum, copper, steel, lead, magnesium, and zinc, 1,296 units (216 of each metal), each 12 x 12 x 1/8 in., overall 432 x 432 in. Art © Carl Andre/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

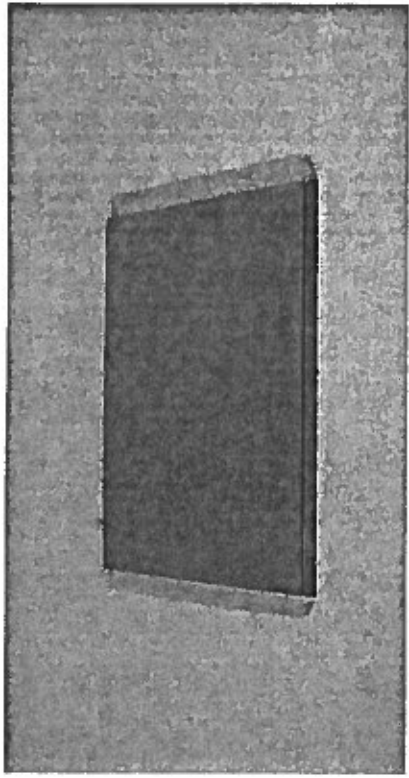
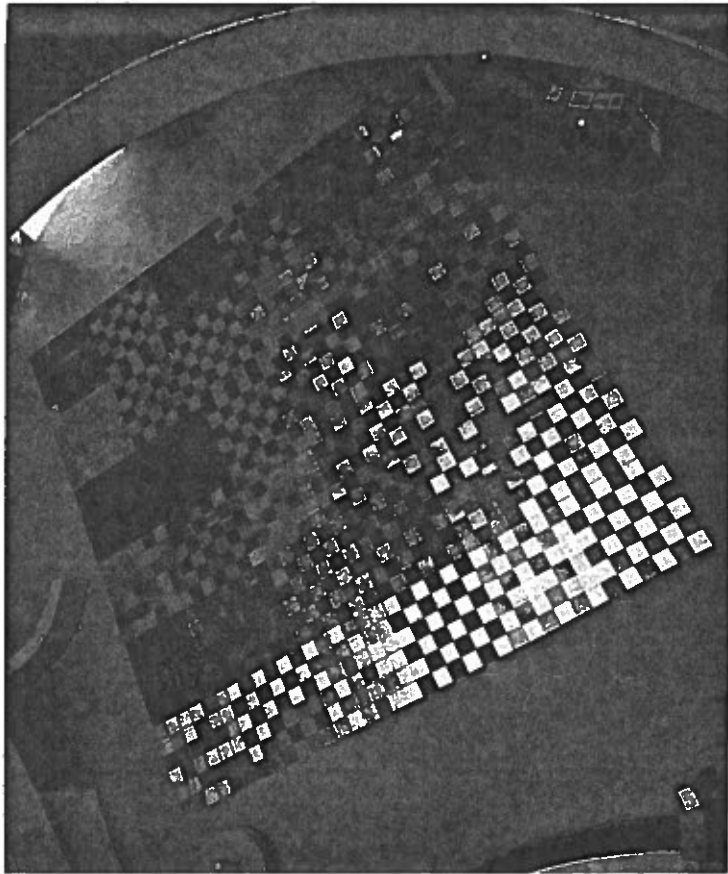


PLATE 5 Carl Andre, *Gold Field*, 1966. Gold, 3 x 3 x 1/8 in. Photograph by Jeffrey Price, courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Art © Carl Andre/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

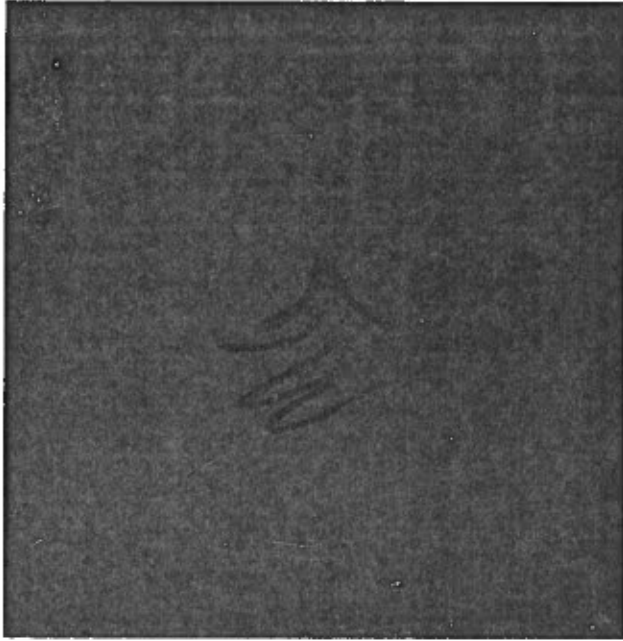


PLATE 6 Carl Andre, reverse side of magnesium plate from *Magnesium-Zinc Plate*, 1969, with Dow imprint. Photograph by Pablo Mason. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Art © Carl Andre/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



PLATE 7 Installation shot of Robert Morris: Recent Works at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1970. Photograph by Peter Moore. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

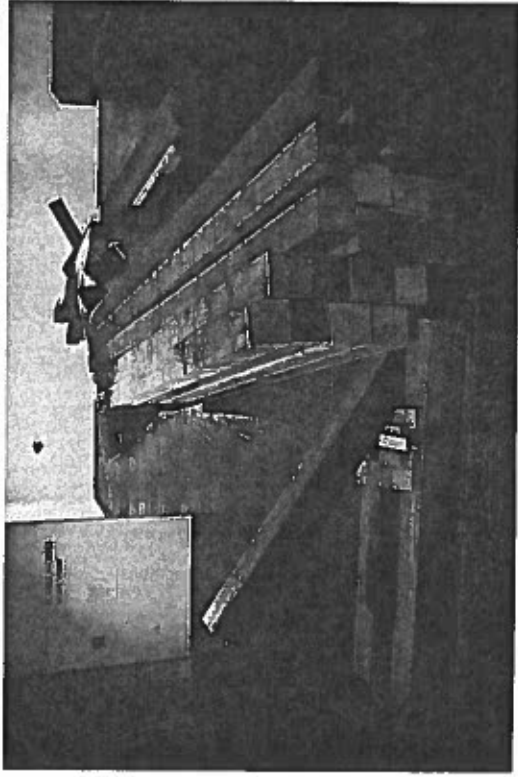


PLATE 8 Robert Morris, *Untitled (Timbers)*, 1970, installation piece for the Whitney show. Wood, approx. 12 x 20 x 50 ft. Destroyed. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt © 2009 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



PLATE 9 Robert Morris, *Untitled (Concrete, Timbers, Steel)*, detail, 1970. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt © 2009 Estate of Rudy Burckhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Art © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Instead, as a letter back to Hightower emphasized, "You fail to understand the meaning of symbolic denial (closing the museum for ONE DAY!) which speaks to the actual denial of life by forces of violence."¹²²

The conditions for an art strike lasted only a few months, as they were embedded in the specific historical coincidence of the Vietnam War, the large-scale strikes around the country, and the activities of the AWC. As early as September 1970, postmortems for the Art Strike appeared in print: "Feelings among Strike activists range from apathy to suspicion to disgust. The protest, if not destroyed, is dormant. What happened?"¹²³ By November 1970, the Art Strike had birthed several related organizations, one of them the Emergency Cultural Government, an ad hoc group (including Morris) that lobbied artists to withdraw from the American Pavilion at the 1970 Venice Biennale to protest U.S. military action in Vietnam and Cambodia.¹²⁴

What had happened? The answer lies, in part, in the growing feminist movement and the defection of many women involved in the Art Strike to women's action groups, which I discuss further in Chapter 4. And, despite the attention paid to the word *racism* in the Art Strike, some artists of color felt that this was merely lip service.¹²⁵ The Art Strike eventually was folded back into the AWC, and its activities tapered off by the end of 1971, although it did help mobilize the museum staff as workers and was actively supportive of the union drive and strike of the Professional and Administrative Staff Association of the Museum of Modern Art.

In a further resignifying of the potent symbol of the hard hat within the context of a strike, one protest poster from the 1971 PASTA MoMA strike appropriates the Rembrandt-school painting *Men in a Golden Helmet* (Fig. 48). The subject of this canonical painting is made to speak, as a pasted-on word balloon saying "Strike" issues forth from his closed lips. Many of the strategies used by the strikers in their placards were art-historically savvy, with a similarly detoured Bruegel painting and the familiar image of Uncle Sam. The Rembrandt-era work, perhaps chosen because the helmet of the title was so prominent, was captioned "Even a few hard hats support PASTA MOMA," making reference to the ostensibly conservative blue-collar workforce so politically contested just one year before.

Every standard account of the closure of Morris's Whitney show puts it within the context of the Art Strike. Was there, perhaps, another reason that Morris was so eager to shut down his Whitney show on May 15? In the aftermath of the hard-hat riots, construction was no longer a viable metaphor for the new relations between work, labor, and politics that Morris sought in 1970. The intense ideological contradictions that accompanied the yoking together of "art" and "workers" were made starkly, and

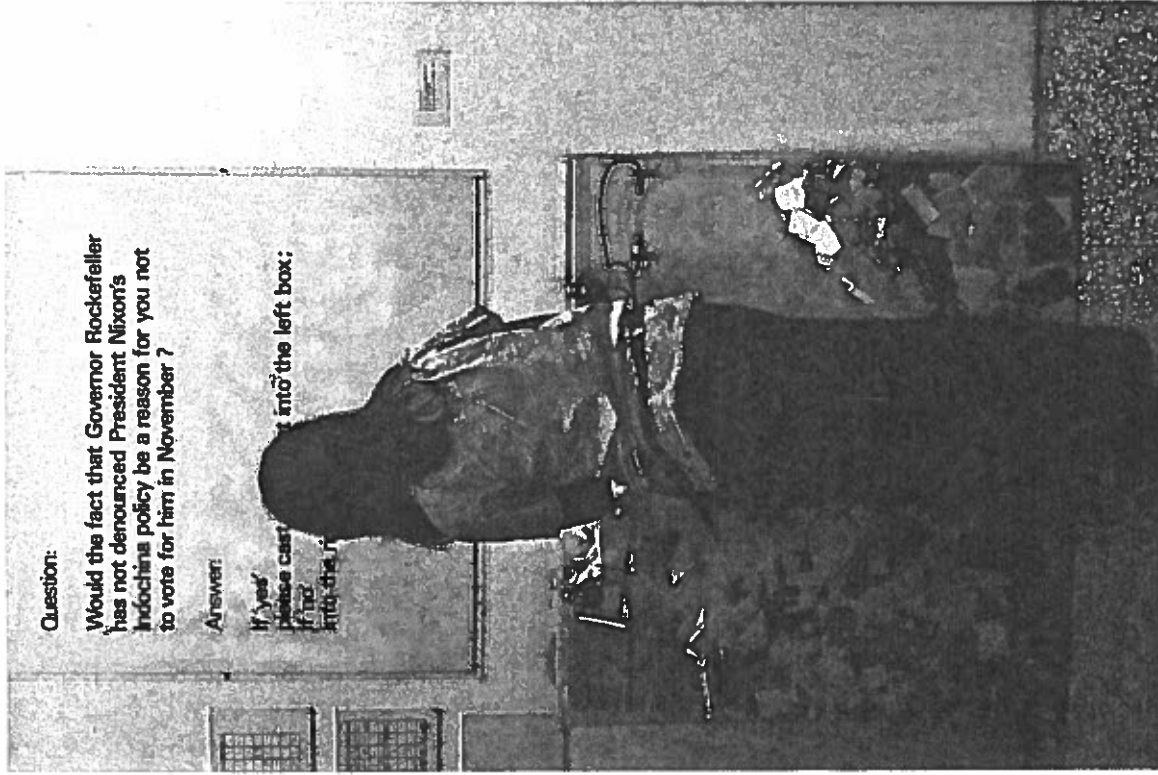


PLATE 12 Hans Haacke, *MOMA-Poll*, 1970. Interactive installation with clear plastic voting boxes, text panel, chart of results, at *Information* exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photograph by Hans Haacke. © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



FIGURE 48 Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA) of the Museum of Modern Art on strike, August 30, 1971, supported by the Art Workers' Coalition. Photograph © Jan van Reay.

uncomfortably, visible. The driving ideas behind the Whitney exhibition, with its ambitious, even wishful assertions of collaborative production, workers and artist working side by side, had soured. One writer described the following pervasive feeling in the wake of the hard-hat riots: "The masses, those cabdrivers, beauticians, steelworkers, ironworkers, and construction men so beautifully romanticized by generations of dreamy socialists, are really an ugly bunch of people."¹²⁶ After the hard-hat riots in May 1970, Morris commented in the *New York Post*, "Museums are our campus."¹²⁷ This assertion draws a parallel between student strikes and the Art Strike, solidifying the artists' affinity with *students* rather than with blue-collar workers.

In Morris's Whitney show, the art is formally associated with the building trades, as are the myriad photographs that depict it as an active "construction site." Underscoring that he was above all an art worker, Morris performed the position of the blue-collar forklift driver, such an identity proved far less alluring after blue-collar workers stormed down lower Manhattan waving flags and beating up students. Morris's sudden involvement with the Art Strike struck some as careerist or opportunistic; stickers appeared in downtown New York that read, "Robert Morris: Prince of Peace."¹²⁸ Critic Nemser scoffed, "Greater sacrifice hath no man than to shut down his art show for his fellow man."¹²⁹ Although Morris was at the periphery of the AWC before the Art Strike, his involvement in the Art Strike and the Emergency Cultural Government constituted genuine efforts to come to terms with the ethics of art making and art display in the "museum system." It also represented an attempt to find

a new kind of political viability after his formal process exercise at the Whitney turned into such a critical, aesthetic, and ideological disappointment.

Morris's disillusionment with the possibility for cross-class affiliation paralleled that of the New Left in general, as the Left embraced Marcuse's belief that the working class was "counterrevolutionary."¹³⁰ The Whitney show, which was the residue of collaborative production with a team of dozens of workers, suddenly betrayed sympathies with regressive politics, and Morris sought to remove it from view. Certainly, the art projects he proposed in the months after the end of the Whitney show, with their focus on precisely his uncertainties revolving around labor, the value of art, and questions of collectivity, articulate a rejection of his previous models of art making.

Morris On and Off the Clock

Where could Morris go after striking at the Whitney? Morris seemed to sense that the way he'd been working was insufficient to address the turmoil of these six weeks in 1970. He pondered the question in a notebook a month after his show closed: "Feel I have to re-invent an art viable for myself and consonant with the conditions of change that have occurred over these last two months. Something either more public or more private? No clear idea at this point."¹³¹ Morris remained serious about his commitment to deflating overvalued artistic labor, as his next project demonstrated. This was the Peripatetic Artists Guild (PAG), a series of proposed projects based on "saleless wage commissions" (Fig. 49). Starting in November 1970, Morris placed a series of ads in art magazines announcing that the guild (consisting only of Morris and, briefly, Craig Kauffman) was available for projects such as "explosions—events for the quarter horse—chemical swamps—monuments—speeches—outdoor sounds for the varying seasons—alternate political systems." Ranging from the prosaic (speeches) to the toxic (chemical swamps) to the utopian (alternate political systems), these proposals were to be executed for a twenty-five-dollar-an-hour wage "plus all travel, materials, construction and other costs to be paid by the owner-sponsor."

Morris's list included both art and nonart activities; some of them, such as "theatrical projects for the masses," had vaguely political overtones that alluded back to the Art Strike. Many of them reflected work he had already been engaged in (such as riding quarter horses). The owner-sponsor, as he termed it, could call on the artist to execute any number of actions, all for the same pay, negating the hierarchy that assigns different scales of value to art pieces than to, say, construction projects. The

use of the term *guild* recalls a skilled artisanal association, and this language was perhaps used in concert with the AWC, both asserted art's legitimacy as a profession. Although Morris placed the ads hoping to solicit proposals, resulting in queries from twenty-one interested parties, no commissioned projects came out of the PAG (in retrospect it appears to offer a remarkably good deal).

Morris did not mean the PAG as a joke; he saw it as the future of progressive art practices. As he wrote, "Working wages for art effort in an interacting situation with the outside world must replace [the museum/gallery system]."112 The art world, apparently, was not ready to embrace this replacement, and disapproval came even from such seemingly sympathetic quarters as the fledgling *Artworkers News*, a broadsheet published in New York between 1971 and 1982.¹¹³ Sandwiched between items on laws affecting artists and getting health insurance and listed under the heading "Rip-Offs and Cop-Outs: Tales of Horror from the Art World!" was an article appalled by the "fake" business of the Peripatetic Artists Guild. "We are somewhat concerned by a few aspects of this affair. . . . We would be happy to hear exactly how things were dealt with in this 'guild'."¹¹⁴

If Marx considered wage labor the heart of alienation and exploitation, and often explicitly contrasted it to the relatively free, fulfilling labor of artistic creation, why would artists wish to mime the pay structure of hourly wages?¹¹⁵ Morris's resort to wage labor in the PAG had implications beyond the financial. The PAG would secure his place within a class system in which artists were on some level equivalent to wage workers—the epic performance of work was no longer the best way to critique the system. At this point, the display of construction in the Whitney exhibit appeared showy or false. His project proposals in the summer of 1970 after the closure of the Whitney show even go so far as to mock his previously straightforward attempts to forge a collective model of working. Instead, his rehearsals of the procedures of construction turned into a farce.

One proposal, called "Work at Pier 45," is a kind of ironic coda to the Whitney show, envisioned at an incredibly grand scale. This pageant-type event was to include a nude woman leading a team of horses, which are themselves dragging enormous U.S. flags covered in flyers that picture the atrocities of the Vietnam War, as well as jugglers, acrobats, firefighters playing poker, and a National Guard drill team. The proposal continues: "The Timber Piece I did at the Whitney will be redone. The forty 26 foot timbers will be brought up on the moving luggage ramps, assembled and spilled. The process should take several hours and require a crew of five."¹¹⁶ Thirty white rabbits would be released, a dozen televisions would be scattered throughout

THE PERIPATETIC ARTISTS GUILD ANNOUNCES

ROBERT MORRIS

Available for Commissions Anywhere in the World

EXPLOSIONS—EVENTS FOR THE QUARTER HORSE—CHEMICAL SWAMPS—MONUMENTS—SPEECHES—OUTDOOR SOUNDS FOR THE VARYING SEASONS—ALTERNATE POLITICAL SYSTEMS—DELUGES—DESIGN AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF MUTATED FORMS OF LIFE AND OTHER VAGUELY AGRICULTURAL PHENOMENA, SUCH AS DISCIPLINED TREES—EARTHWORKS—DEMONSTRATIONS—PRESTIGIOUS OBJECTS FOR HOME, ESTATE, OR MUSEUM—THEATRICAL PROJECTS FOR THE MASSES—EPIC AND STATIC FILMS—FOUNTAINS IN LIQUID METALS—ENSEMBLES OF CURIOUS OBJECTS TO BE SEEN WHILE TRAVELING AT HIGH SPEEDS—NATIONAL PARKS AND HANGING GARDENS—ARTISTIC DIVERSIONS OF RIVERS—SCULPTURAL PROJECTS—

Collaborative Projects with Other Artists Invited

The above is but a partial listing of projects in which the artist is qualified to engage. No project is too small or too large. The artist will respond to all inquiries regarding commissions of whatever nature

Terms of Commissions

Sales or fees for any projects are not acceptable. A \$25.00 per working hour wage plus all travel, materials, construction and other costs to be paid by the owner-sponsor. Subsequent sales of any project by the owner-sponsor will require a 50% return of funds to the Peripatetic Artists Guild (PAG) to be held in trust for the furtherance of saleless wage commissions between other artists and owner-sponsors. A contract will be issued for every commission.

Address all Inquiries to PAG, 186 Grand St.
NYC 10013

FIGURE 49 Robert Morris, "The Peripatetic Artists Guild Announces Robert Morris," 1970. Printed advertisement, *Artforum* 9 (November 1970): 23. © 2009 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the scene, and the audience members—wearing placards around their necks with the names of casualties from the Vietnam War—would watch the scene perched on bales of hay. This proposal is notable for its reimagining of the Whitney timber piece, and because Morris inserted pictures of war horrors and the names of the dead into this circuslike atmosphere.

A different proposal from the same period imagines a choreographed scene of mass toil: “100 men in a field dragging a steel plate . . . 100 men and women planting, 20 men carrying timber, 20 men rolling large boulders, 10 horses.” *Untitled (Timbers)*, originally conceived as an earnest attempt to forge a method of transparent production, has metamorphosed into a fantastical scene of a campy, Busby Berkeley-type spectacle, as if conceding that that was its place, in fact, all along. Morris spun out visions of vast work with a pluralized and mixed gender cast, yet he recognized the hollowness of its forced collectivity. He added: “Make a political text for these differentiating any false Marxist notions about togetherness, the workers, etc. Some of text from Marx himself—i.e. demonstrate by words that its political content merely apparent—i.e. the ‘collectivism’ of the working people useless, non-productive, art.”¹¹⁷ From the Whitney exhibition, to the Art Strike, to the wage labor of the PAG, to this sorry scene of “useless art”: the trajectory here is toward cynicism.

Morris's transition also records a widely shared cultural sense that work, war, and resistance might all be subsumed, and diffused, under the category of the spectacle.¹¹⁸ He moved from an old-fashioned (even Old Left) idea of the arm-in-arm linkers. This is not Abbie Hoffman's strategic, even ecstatic acceptance of an image culture and media intervention; rather, it is akin to Todd Gitlin's bitter contention that the embrace of spectacle—that moment when protesters addressed the cameras to proclaim, “The whole world is watching”—was the very death of the New Left.¹¹⁹ If the Whitney show was a failure, it was because the elements Morris wished to bring together were irreconcilable. Morris's re-presentation of industrial objects and his desire to shift them from the realm of art to work led not only to a romanticized personal identification with working-class labor but also to culturally incoherent objects. While Morris wanted a show that would be sensitive to populist visions of artists and workers collectively forging new relationships, the version of labor he performed was fast obsolescing. The crude pulleys and weights do not necessarily speak to their moment—a moment that was rapidly undergoing major shifts—but in fact hark back to a previous time.

Morris's Whitney show does not even demonstrate a last gasp of industrial man-

ufacture just as that version of construction becomes moot. As Michelson notes, these basics of construction date from Stonehenge and the pyramids. She quotes a crew worker's astonished utterance upon witnessing the installation of *Concrete, Timbers, Steel*: “My God! This is like 2000 BC!”¹²⁰ In his effort to forge an art from raw materials and construction crews, Morris displayed a profound nostalgia for the preindustrial (rather than postindustrial) mechanics of hard manual work. (This sentiment includes nostalgia for the lost masculinity of working-class manhood. In this, Morris is not alone; anxieties attendant to shifts in the conditions of production—and in times of war—are often displaced or refigured in sexualized terms.)

The collapse of artists' identification with workers after the hard-hat riots points to the misrecognitions inherent in trying to eradicate distinctions between art and labor.¹⁴¹ Morris's 1970 Whitney exhibition—and its photos of strong-armed workers hauling heavy loads, their faces grimacing, their muscles straining—crystallized apprehensions facing the leftist U.S. art world about how to make art viable as a form of labor. Why, in so many of the shots of Morris in which he is supposedly one of the workers, is he puffing on a cigar, the very symbol of “bossness”? The fictive identification with labor that these works insist upon vacillates between the artist as foreman and the artist as “construction man.” It is critical that there are no photos of Morris actually wearing a hard hat during the installation of the 1970 Whitney show; it sits on his head spectrally, in the realm of psychic projection and fantasy.

Despite a flurry of major press attention given the Whitney show in 1970, it has largely disappeared from Morris's historical record.¹⁴² This erasure is striking. It discounts Morris's most important (if problematic) effort to merge political purpose and artistic form, and it overlooks the pivotal role the exhibition played in Morris's own development. After the Whitney and Tate shows, Morris abandoned postminimalism as he shifted away from nonfigurative process art. Thus Morris's Whitney show produced a critical rupture within his practice; as Alex Potts has astutely theorized, the Whitney show constituted a “crisis . . . ending in a bleak rejection of almost everything [Morris] had seemed to stand for.”¹⁴³ The events of 1970 signaled a major shift in American artists' ideas about the relation between art and labor, the AWC itself limped along for only about a year after the Art Strike. The Art Strike is often referred to as a triumphant moment of artistic activism, but investigating the contradictions attendant to its most fervent period—May 1970—reveals the fractured and unsettled nature of the identity “art worker.”