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THE PRESENT COMPLEX

Lawrence Alloway and the Currency of Museums

Currency

In the early 1970s, the critic and curator Lawrence Alloway published a remarkable series of articles that directly confronted the political, economic, and ideological struggles faced by art institutions in the United States. With subjects such as artists' protests against the Vietnam War, the 1973 strike at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the undermining of curatorial authority, and the ramifications of staff unionization, Alloway chronicled a growing sense that art museums were, on several fronts, in a state of "crisis" and that art criticism was tainted by collective feelings of "uneasiness/disgust."¹ Primarily published in *Artforum* and *The Nation*, Alloway's essays at this time were especially concerned with questions of *currency*—that is, how the museum could be current, up to date, and relevant to the still-unfolding conditions of the now.² Donald Kuspit has remarked that "topicality is Alloway's watchword and obsession."³ For Alloway, the contemporary moment—which he termed the "complex present"—is complicated because of its "unsettled issues" and "topics in suspense" that might be understood only in the future, with the clarity of historical distance.⁴ Emphasizing his relationship to temporality, Alloway practiced what he called "short-term art history," a provisional, contingent record that was as accurate as possible given the uncertainty of what we can know at any given time.⁵

This essay looks closely at a few years within Alloway's decades-long career and contends that this "complex present" should be revisited and inverted, arguing that what was at stake regarding the crisis of museums in the late 1960s and early 1970s could also be called a *present complex*—a complex (in other words, neurosis or anxiety) about the precise status of the present moment for art institutions.⁶ I argue that Alloway's work at this time clustered around sets of interrelated problems, each of which I examine in turn: the expansion of the art world, a pluralistic approach to evaluation, the waning influence of curators and museums, the commercialization of artistic production, the politicization of artists' rights, the crisis of art criticism, and the unionization of museum

staff. These pressing issues both shadowed and structured Alloway's writing in the early 1970s.

Increasingly, Alloway took museums to task for refusing to recognize their role as not only safeguards of the past but also active shapers of contemporary culture. *Currency* has a double meaning that was significant for Alloway as he considered how museums, as well as other facets of art's support structures (like art magazines, corporate patrons, and educational institutions), are irrevocably steeped in market exchanges. These structures create charged forms of valuation that are unequally applied at every level of involvement with artistic circulation and distribution, from artists to critics to museum employees, including manual laboring art handlers and high-level curators. During these years, Alloway—who, as a curator and a critic, was implicated himself in this *system* (a term he was greatly invested in)—tackled disparate levels of compensation and unequal systems of worth head-on, just as such issues were becoming more visible and more urgent.

He pursued an alternative model of criticism that he referred to not only as “short-term art history” but also, more potently, as “anthropological” art history, in which art is not cordoned off from economics or social conditions of circulation but instead is integrated within a wide frame that includes the creation and management of culture.⁷ Alloway's notion of anthropology does not reject qualitative assessment based on value judgments but integrates those judgments with hard facts, deploying quantitative data such as economic statistics in an ethnographic manner. Though Alloway attempted a wider humanistic inquiry into cultural production, he was not trained in anthropology's specific disciplinary methodologies; in fact, his method of aggregating information also resembles a sociological approach to art.⁸ Yet his hybrid practice of criticism evidences some distinctive characteristics that overlap with the field of anthropology, namely participant-observer methods of immersive fieldwork, and, most significantly, taking a self-reflexive approach that acknowledges one's implication within one's object of study. Rather than assuming a detached or “neutral” observer, the reflexive scholar attempts to grapple with his or her own subjectivity and power; significantly, this reflexive turn in anthropology emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, just as Alloway became interested in questions of critical complicity within institutional systems.⁹

Expansion

Alloway's output in the late 1960s and early 1970s tended to focus on the changing state of the art museum, which was not exceptional given his long-standing interest in broader questions of cultural formation. His forays into

these anthropological analyses of the art world were prefigured by writings in the 1950s such as “The Long Front of Culture,” which argued for expanded attention to mass media and other popular forms of production.¹⁰ Widely known for a nondogmatic, eclectic approach to criticism, Alloway championed no one style nor promoted a single theoretical lens. Instead, his work was sympathetic and inclusive; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this inclusion took a decidedly political cast as he began to take seriously work made in the wake of both the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism.

Indeed, Alloway’s concerns about the museum’s function must be placed in relation to broader questions about the exclusion of white women artists and artists of color within museums, as these issues drove both artistic activism against institutions and, increasingly, Alloway’s own curatorial and critical commitments. The crisis of the museum that so concerned Alloway in the late 1960s and early 1970s is inseparable from questions of race and gender. One overarching question of interest to Alloway at this time was, “What does art do for such groups as women or blacks? How do museums relate to artists, to the community as a whole?”¹¹ Alloway had begun to write about artists of color by the late 1960s, and he became a more visibly active promoter of black artists in 1969, when he cocurated, with Princeton Art Museum curator Sam Hunter, a show titled *5 + 1* at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (now called Stony Brook University), where Alloway taught in the art department and where he also served as the gallery director/curator (fig. 1). *5 + 1* featured six black artists (all men), including Frank Bowling and Jack Whitten.¹² The curatorial statement in the exhibition brochure is silent about the political ramifications of a show about black artists curated by two white men, but it does discuss the artists’ use of abstraction and their philosophy of art for art’s sake, as well as their explicit connections to African and African American issues: “The situation of black artists is ambiguous: there is considerable use of the idea of art as an instrument to advance Black identity, Black rights; there is, also, clearly and successfully, an impulse towards the making of art as art. In the artists’ statements in this catalogue, both possibilities oscillate.”¹³ In other words, Alloway and Hunter understood that these artists’ forms of abstraction—despite their ostensible lack of subject matter—should not be deracinated or universalized but instead should retain their specificity within the context of black artistic traditions, and therefore might have profound, if oblique, political possibilities.

By the mid-1970s, Alloway was also reviewing more and more art by women, and he became the first prominent male art critic to write about women’s art—particularly, pointedly feminist art—in major art publications. In part this move

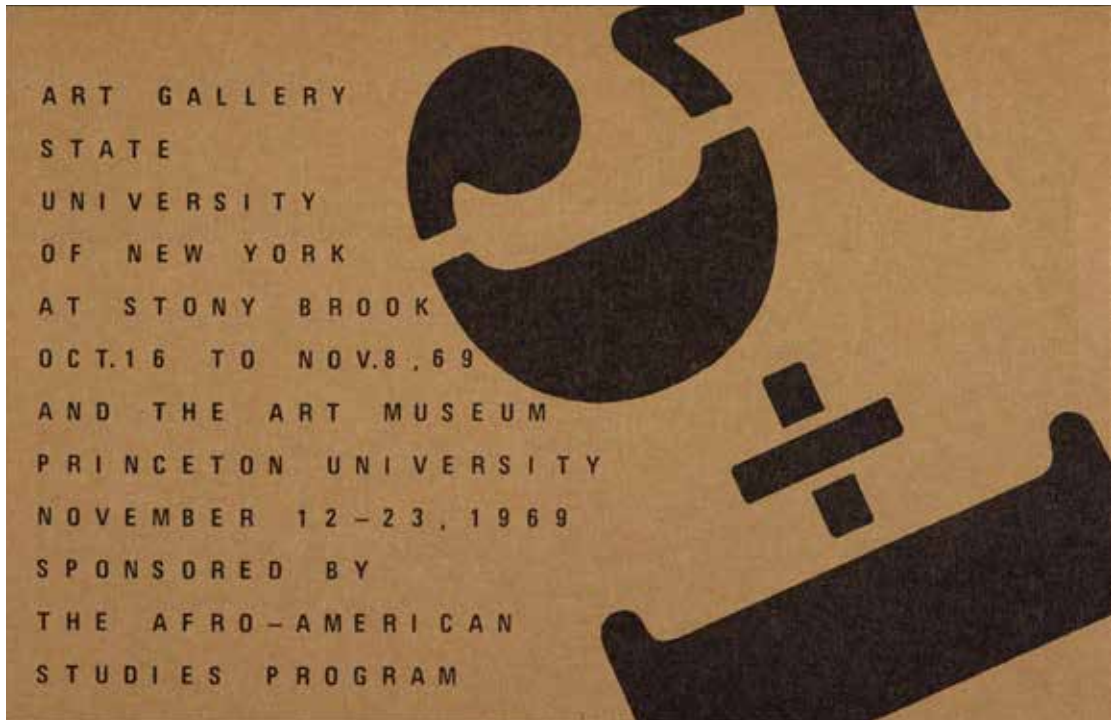


Fig. 1.
Cover of Lawrence Alloway's
exhibition brochure *5+1*,
published by Art Gallery,
State University of New York
at Stony Brook, 1969.
Los Angeles, Getty Research
Institute.

to a more inclusive position was influenced by his wife, the pioneering feminist artist Sylvia Sleigh, but it should also be seen as an outgrowth of his larger commitment to take seriously previously marginalized voices. As he commented in notes regarding Sleigh's impact on his career, "I see my involvement w[ith] women's art as part of the (general) politicization of art."¹⁴ These issues are difficult if not impossible to segregate; for Alloway, recognizing white women artists (not all of whom were self-identified as feminists) and artists of color was deeply formative and existed alongside and in relation to his writings on museums, because they were both part of the present conditions—the *currency*—that museums were agonizingly slow to exhibit. He was sharply critical of the outdated overrepresentation of white male artists in biennials and annuals, which he saw as a blatant refusal to acknowledge developments as they were occurring. "The [Whitney] Annuals do not function efficiently to distribute fresh information," he wrote in a column in *The Nation*, pointing to his explicit valuation of museum currency.¹⁵ Along with the concept of *freshness*, the term *information* is pivotal here; Stephen Moonie has described Alloway's understanding of criticism as information, unpacking how *information* signified in the moment with regard to Alloway's absorption of cybernetics theory and in terms of its use in Kynaston McShine's *Information* exhibition at MoMA in 1970.¹⁶

Obsolescence

A few years later, in his article “The Great Curatorial Dim-Out,” Alloway became even more specific regarding his insistence that museums maintain their contemporary relevance, fuming:

The curators should be expected to be in touch with changing social and stylistic forces, but the history of the exhibition does not support this expectation. It was only after demonstrations that the curators increased the representation of women in the [Whitney] annuals. Why had the curators not anticipated the pressure of women artists and recognized their exhibitability before the issue became a crisis? The fact that the representation of women climbed steeply is, of course, an admission of their previous error. If women’s work had not been esthetically acceptable to them, I assume that the curators would not have modified their original position. It is hard to imagine a more difficult task for a White curator than the Whitney’s *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. Then why was it organized in such a way as to antagonize the Black community and embarrass the curator [Robert] Doty? It is another failure of the power to assess correctly the changing situation in the artworld.¹⁷

This passage indicates that Alloway was deeply concerned with questions of contemporaneity and palpably felt the failure of museums to account for their own activities in relation to “the changing situation in the artworld,” in other words, the impact of political movements, such as feminism and civil rights. Because of an inability to stay topical and current, “the profession of the curator is in crisis,” he bluntly hypothesized.¹⁸ Yet the challenge of how to maintain this currency given the relatively slow pace of museum calendars and the lag in curatorial scheduling was something that Alloway, a former curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, was keenly aware of. His insider knowledge of these constraints made him quite clear-eyed and pragmatic about how museums could better reflect shifting values, and thus all the more agitated when they were unable, or refused, to do so, as in the case of the Whitney Annual.

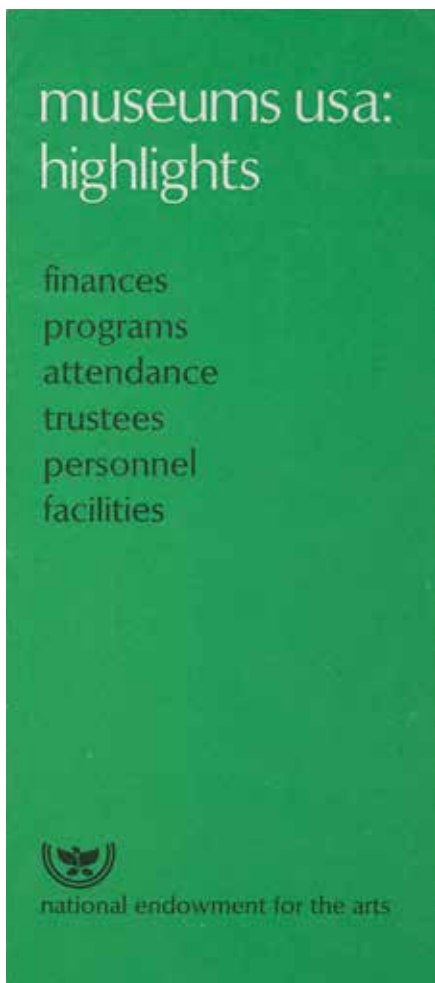
In contrast to the glacial tempo of the museum with all its delays and retrograde ways, Alloway sought to keep track of rapidly changing social and economic conditions. How, though, could a critic stay on top of the mountains of information about the present crisis in museums—widely discussed at this time from a spectrum of perspectives within both more conservative and more progressive venues—and be appropriately accountable to those perspectives in his or her own writing? In order to stay abreast of the swirling debates, Alloway

was an assiduous reader of newspapers and journals, as well as a collector of all manner of texts, handbooks, brochures, and protest matter related to art, politics, and art institutions. He amassed a vast array of clippings from a variety of publications, both mainstream and alternative, and he would often annotate and refer to this material in his writings.

Among the diverse materials on this topic in his personal archive (now housed at the Getty Research Institute) are articles ranging from the Houston-based *Judaism: The Jewish Digest* (“What Ails the Jewish Museum: An Institution Adrift”) to polemics from the California-based newspaper for the Black Panther Party. In the former, printed in 1969, the Jewish Museum is diagnosed as “not well,” failing in its efforts to balance its specialized mission with a sense of contemporary relevance; in the latter, from 1970, Black Panther minister of culture Emory Douglas rejects art museums altogether, stating that “the time has come when all artists must take a stand against the reactionary forces in racist America or bite the dust, along with all other reactionaries” and proposing an open call for progressive work that will be collected in a book of “People’s revolution art.”¹⁹ This range of perspectives about the contested role of art and art institutions from across the country displays how remarkably attentive Alloway was to the full gamut of opinions about the interface of artistic production, institutionalization, and social movements in America.

Also found among Alloway’s papers are items related to wider economic issues, such as articles from sociologists regarding class-based social stratification and *Wall Street Journal* columns dissecting global monetary woes related to devaluation of currency and the competitive international circulation of goods. One such clipping from a newspaper article includes the following underlined sentence among several flagged passages: “When a currency floats, its value is determined by the market and may fluctuate sharply.”²⁰ One can only speculate about how such analyses might have affected Alloway’s anthropological understanding of the interrelation between art markets and other sorts of markets, but it is clear from his writing at this moment that he was thinking through questions about the monetization of art, not least his own key, implicated position in that enterprise as a critic and freelance curator. He also gathered texts that pointed to a widespread dissatisfaction with museums, such as a 1973 article from the *New York Times* that asked a question that seemed to be on many people’s minds: “Why Should Anyone Go to Museums Any More?”²¹ Such articles signaled a larger discourse regarding the diminished role of the museum in public culture. For a critic and curator like Alloway—who was not only invested in museums as repositories of public culture but also distrustful of their elitist gatekeeping function, especially after he became disenchanted by the machinations of major museums during his tenure at the

Fig. 2.
Museums USA: Highlights,
brochure produced by the
National Endowment for
the Arts, 1973.
Los Angeles, Getty Research
Institute.



Guggenheim—this recognition of the museum’s diminished role was no doubt received with some ambivalence.

Museums were imperiled not only from without (because of a perceived waning interest in their programs and exhibits) but also from within, as financial upheavals threatened many institutions and forced heavy budget reductions. Traces of Alloway’s research into the bleak financial situation facing many American museums in this era, including a pamphlet issued by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Museums USA: Highlights* (fig. 2), are also found among his papers. This survey of the field was begun in May 1972 and published in November 1973 (with a book-length study on the same topics issued in 1974), providing a snapshot of economic conditions of museums of natural history, science, art, and so forth. The study glumly concluded that “of all museum types, art had the highest proportion of museums in which cutbacks were necessary.”²² Alloway was diligent during these years about collecting a range of perspectives,

including governmental reports, museum-based professional association newsletters, such as that of the Association of Art Museum Directors, and acquisition transaction records for places including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was under scrutiny for its deaccessioning policies.²³ These are the files of not only an art critic grappling with the problems of the current moment but also an investigative reporter performing due diligence when piecing together an exposé. “Network: The Art World Described as a System,” from 1972, was meant to be one such revelation; in this essay, Alloway combined systems theory with an analysis of the interlocking structures that govern artistic distribution. Published in the tenth-anniversary issue of *Artforum*, which referenced itself by putting a photo of its own offices on the cover, “Network” described how “all of us are looped together in a new and unsettling connectivity.”²⁴ The reflexivity emphasized by this cover, in which *Artforum* acknowledged its own role as a tastemaker, was embraced and promoted by Alloway in his anthropological criticism.

Politicization

Notably, Alloway collected many of the fliers and posters created by the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), an organization that came together in 1969 to conduct activities agitating for artists’ rights, including asking for more transparency regarding museum decision making, calling for artist representation on boards of trustees, and, as the group evolved, demanding that museums exhibit more black, Latino, and white women artists.²⁵ Its members included Carl Andre, Hans Haacke, Lucy Lippard, Tom Lloyd, Faith Ringgold, and other artists and writers who came together under the loose and often fraught rubric of *art worker*. The formation of the AWC was sparked by a catalyzing incident regarding artists’ control of their own work; in a guerrilla action, the Greek artist Takis unplugged a kinetic sculpture that he had created and carried it out of an exhibition at MoMA to assert his ownership of the work and his discontent with the conditions of its display.

Yet the AWC broadened its horizons quickly to become the primary outlet for left-leaning artistic activism in New York at that time, launching protests against MoMA’s Rockefeller-studded board of trustees’ involvement in the Vietnam War and advocating for a free day at MoMA, one of the group’s most concrete victories. One flier, “All Museums Free—A.W.C.,” heralds this victory, urging a large turnout for MoMA’s first free Monday, stating “It is free because the Art Workers Coalition fought to make it free. It is free because a growing cultural revolution in this country requires that it be free and that the functions of all cultural institutions, along with the very definition of ‘culture’ itself, be

ALL MUSEUMS FREE - A.W.C.

COME TO THE FIRST FREE MONDAY AT THE MODERN MUSEUM ON FEBRUARY 9TH BETWEEN 5 AND 9 P.M. BY COMING AT THIS TIME YOU WILL HELP TO SHOW THE URGENT NEED FOR CULTURE WHICH IS ACCESSIBLE AND MEANINGFUL TO THE ENTIRE POPULATION. THE MUSEUM IS LOCATED AT 11 WEST FIFTY-THIRD STREET IN MANHATTAN.

From February 9 onwards the Museum of "Modern" Art is free on Mondays. It is free because the Art Workers Coalition fought to make it free. It is free because a growing cultural revolution in this country requires that it be free and that the functions of all cultural institutions, along with the very definition of "culture" itself, be expanded to keep pace with a changing society. What is the point of a culture that can only admit a money-paying public to see works of art that must be guarded by guards with guns?

The Art Workers Coalition (A.W.C.) is continuing its fight to reform the art world structure. Here are some of the things it is fighting for:

* To have only one 'pay day' each week, instead of only one free day, at all museums in the country.

* To decentralize all cultural institutions into the poorer and minority areas of this city and to encourage any changes this process may bring about in what we think of as "culture."

* To bring about fair representation of black and puertorican artists in the museums of this city and to give black and puertorican artists the encouragement which the present museum-gallery system has failed to give.

* To give artists a place in running our museums and to bring to artists the same resale and revenue privileges in their work as are available to writers and composers.

* To bring about fair treatment of women artists and of artists without galleries.

* To create free unstructured alternatives to museums, similar to England's arts labs, where cultural preconceptions can be suspended.

COME TO A.W.C. MEETINGS AND HELP US REACH THESE AND OTHER GOALS SOONER—EIGHT O'CLOCK EVERY MONDAY EVENING AT 729 BROADWAY, CORNER OF WAVERLY PLACE, SECOND FLOOR. FOR MORE INFORMATION PHONE 982-1500.

ALL MUSEUMS FREE - A.W.C.

expanded to keep pace with a changing society” (fig. 3). Again, the sense that museums must shift with the times, on “pace with a changing society,” is the central concern.

Alloway wrote about the AWC on numerous occasions, not only in “Network” but also in various short texts in *The Nation*; not all of these articles were uniformly celebratory.²⁶ Rather than unreservedly championing the AWC’s free day success, in which “the museum yielded to [the Coalition’s] pressure,” he was sometimes wary of the group’s presumed status as the major mouthpiece for artistic activism: “The Coalition is the main form by which current protest enters the art world, but it is not the only one.”²⁷ In fact, he was initially skeptical of the AWC’s sometimes overly simplistic claims with regard to museums. In a column from 30 June 1969, he wrote,

A group called the Art Workers’ Coalition has attempted to confront the Museum of Modern Art on the subject of “The New American Painting and Sculpture” show. . . . In the rhetoric of the Coalition the Modern is attacked as if it were monolithic, but this is a distortion of the new situation prevailing at the museum. The long-delayed departure of Alfred Barr and this month the retirement of senior curator Dorothy Miller have released the museum from a protracted ambivalence about American art.²⁸

In other words, in Alloway’s view, the AWC failed to account for present conditions, displaying an outmoded understanding of what the museum’s current state was. He thought many members of the AWC were blinded by their anger and utopian ideals, with a worldview that must be “the product of a malicious or ignorant misunderstanding of the normal operations of an active museum.”²⁹

No doubt it was difficult for Alloway to keep up with the times, not only to track museums’ rotating cast of personnel (including very brief directorial tenures at MoMA, such as the one-year run of director Bates Lowry and the less than two-year reign of John Hightower) but also to monitor and account for the rapid schedule of demonstrations and events involving the AWC and its offshoots. Struggling to map the many strands of political art activity since Takis’s action on 3 January 1969, Alloway generated a number of handwritten timelines that list the AWC’s activities and other related flashpoints in the contentious relationship between artists and museums, including “fruitless exchanges” between Lowry and members of the AWC, a demonstration of three hundred people in MoMA’s sculpture garden, and the contested printing of a poster about the massacre of civilians and children by American soldiers in the village of My Lai (also known as Song My, which Alloway refers to as Song Mi)³⁰ (fig. 4). In addition, he noted when feminists advocated that more dedicated

Fig. 3.
“All Museums Free—A.W.C.,”
flyer for the Art Workers’
Coalition, 1970.
Los Angeles, Getty Research
Institute.

Fig. 4.
Notes by Lawrence Alloway
on artists' political activities
from 1969 to 1970,
ca. 1973.
Los Angeles, Getty Research
Institute.

1969	Jan 3	Tatis / MMA (Marilyn How)	Tatis, Slong, Furus, Howker, Eliel-Bies, Appalain, Calles, Bartcock, Tsai
	LTan	Harlem / met	
	Jan 28	13 Demands	
	Feb-March	Printers exchange: Long / AWC	
	March 10	new signatures	Ades, (F) Calles, Moss, Kowitz, D. Lee, Lippard, Lloyd, Lye, Parsons, Volans (New York- man, mobile type, tag, smudges).
	22	Postcards distrib. pamphlets / MMA	
	30	300 in MMA Garden	
	April 4	M & K ^{using} / Demands	
	June 15	AWC v 1st Convention / MMA	
	June	Demands Demands (14 points)	
	Nov-25	^{DO NOT} Sorry No posters	
	Dec 18		
1970	Jan	Picasso letter	
	Feb	Free Day rehearsal ¹⁹⁷⁰ Provisional & Community Cultural Center	
	April	Gallery Demands	
	May 18	Lock Studios cards meeting	
	22	White shirts... net sit-in	
	June 1	Am. Assoc. of Museums disrupted	
	June	Meli-B. EC Post	
	Sept 19-26	Art for Poor. Reproduction 70. Another	SEPT-29
	Sept	Sorry May / 4 req #2 ins.	

attention be paid to women's issues and began holding protests against museums, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum, for their dismal lack of representation of women artists.³¹

A much more comprehensive timeline, the "Provisional List of Events Related to the Politicization of Artists," begins with the "student rebellion" of the free speech movement at Berkeley in 1964, lists events related to the organization of the women's movement and the AWC, and ends with the spray-painting of "Kill Lies All" on Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* in 1974, Tony Shafrazi's oblique vandalism-cum-protest. There are many more such lists by Alloway on this topic, and their very proliferation in his archive suggests that he was anxious to get a handle on the flow of artistic protests against museums and place them in their wider, albeit unruly, context.

Scattered notes reveal that Alloway was working toward a comprehensive “Index of Discontent” that would begin in 1960 but focus on post-1969 to chronicle “a crisis, a rise up, of dysfunction” that would include “museums, collectors, galleries, politicization of art criticism (anti-commodity and career-building).”³² “What is the reason, if there is a single one, for this situation?” he mused. He posed some possible answers, including the idea that the expansion of art—its overproduction—had put pressure on galleries, museums, critics, and artists alike. “The increased number of artists puts a strain (quantity pressure) on the traditional system of distribution (but how to modify it?).” Alloway produced many pages of notes on this topic, attempting to grasp the complexity of the state of the art world and its many shifting allegiances. Alloway was investigating the root causes of this widespread dysfunction just as he was asking a question that was for him—as well as for many artists in the AWC—increasingly crucial: “How to write about black, Indian, Puerto Rican, and women artists?”³³

In addition, he ventured that class codes of cultural capital in the United States had made viewers more cynical and more critical of art as a product for the elite: “orig. a Marxist tool against capitalism; now a product of sophistication. Hence the situation of skepticism without adequate reform targets in US.” This series of thoughts, condensed by the author’s shorthand, is inflected with the sociological theories of Karl Mannheim, whose writings about class and ideology Alloway knew well.³⁴ Mannheim’s explorations into the development of belief systems based on social stratification may have given Alloway some purchase on the complex and often veiled registers of class in his nonnative United States.

***Artforum’s* Crisis**

It is vital to recognize that Alloway’s articles documenting museum cultures and their discontents were largely written for *Artforum* under the editorship of John Coplans, who headed the magazine from 1971 to 1977. Coplans had a special interest in broadening the magazine’s focus beyond formalism, and he created a climate in which its contributors wrote pieces about a large range of art world politics, not just reviews of gallery exhibitions. In addition, Coplans (like Alloway) was a British expat, and he promoted writing about white women artists, artists of color, and artists not based in the United States. As Coplans recalled, the shift toward a more pluralistic and political approach “greatly enhanced circulation and greatly enhanced income. We never had such a high income as the year of 1974 when the change began.”³⁵

Though this change turned the magazine around financially and increased its influence, it was met with hostility from some quarters. In a piece titled

“Muddled Marxism Replaces Criticism at *Artforum*,” the art critic Hilton Kramer castigated the “rash of radical chic” that had infected the magazine, a tendency according to which critics denounced those within art institutions as “elitist, repressive exploitative racists and (a latecomer to the lexicon of such invective) sexist.”³⁶ Kramer continues: “Modernist art itself would, on these holiday occasions, be discovered to have nefarious connections with the world of money, privilege and power—to be, indeed, a despised and malignant ‘commodity.’”³⁷ Although his tone is sneering and dismissive, Kramer grasps the fundamental critique of institutions that was nascent in this moment, when artists were becoming ever more aware of the imbrication of museum and corporate interests. One anonymous (undated) letter found in the Alloway papers, written on *Artforum* letterhead, accuses museums of being “hostages to Galleries and Collectors” and decries the “secret commitments and the initiatives that have made dealer-financed shows increasing phenomena.”³⁸

Although the atmosphere in the early 1970s among the editorial board at *Artforum* (which included Alloway, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Robert Pincus-Witten) was hostile if not toxic, the magazine under Coplans did consistently provide an outlet for extended, substantial writings that directly confronted major art establishments.³⁹ Alloway was far from the only critic interested in these concerns, and as the conceptual branch of art known as institutional critique began to take shape, major essays by artists, such as Ian Burn’s “The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation,” examined questions of money, taste, and power from a far more critical stance than that of Alloway.⁴⁰ Writers such as Max Kozloff and Eva Cockroft also contributed substantial scholarly interventions into the history of modernism that linked the U.S. government’s patronage of art during the Cold War with ideological notions of freedom in abstract expressionism.

Yet Alloway played a special role at *Artforum* due to his insistence that no one school of art triumphed above others. He was widely recognized as the most insistent critic in his acknowledgment of and advocacy for pluralism, that is, the idea that there was not one dominant style but rather a multiplicity of artistic modes, schools, and possibilities. In an interview in 1975, Coplans recounted that he brought Alloway into the *Artforum* fold “for one factor and one factor only. That was the notion of the coexistence of styles.”⁴¹ Alloway had always cast his critical net widely and was thus less apprehensive than other art critics when the art world began to expand and the role of the critic as definitive tastemaker began to wane.

As Alloway commented in 1974, “I felt pretty cool about this moment of crisis about the function of art criticism when it came, because I have never thought that art was something to be isolated from the rest of culture anyway.”⁴²

By contrast, Coplans echoed the larger feeling that “there is much more a sense of anxiety now than there was at any previous time,” stemming in part from “too many galleries junking the quality of the work.”⁴³ The AWC (which was more or less defunct by 1972) had started an early conversation regarding the “decentralization” of art, hoping to move art away from a few sanctified museums by placing it in a range of sites; by the mid-1970s, this decentralization was starting to come to fruition as self-organized groups of artists began to take advantage of still-cheap rents in downtown Manhattan and formed their own art spaces. As a result of this and other factors, the exhibition possibilities for art proliferated. Rather than participate in Coplans’s anxiety about this expansion “junking the quality,” Alloway, more than any other regular *Artforum* critic, enthusiastically reported on the new galleries opening in SoHo, the growth of artist cooperatives, the rise of alternative spaces, and the opening of institutions in sites such as Harlem (the Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio, founded in 1968 and 1969, respectively) and downtown (the downtown branch of the Whitney opened in 1973 at 55 Water Street).⁴⁴ “It seems that alternative spaces require alternative critics,” he noted.⁴⁵ Fellow critic Carter Ratcliff noted that Alloway was “born again in the seventies,” transformed into “Manhattan’s one true populist critic.”⁴⁶ As such, he was somewhat less focused on the activities of museums, leaving their hothouse debates behind as he documented practices such as street art and murals, public sculpture, earthworks, and performance. He wrote in 1970 that “the gallery system is under pressure again, as it was ten years ago, from the activity of downtown cooperatives run by artists. Now the pressure is from two sources, young artists who detect commercialism everywhere and experimental artists who work in hard-to-exhibit forms.”⁴⁷ Alloway traveled to see art where it took him, to small renegade spaces as well as outdoors, where artists were making non-object-oriented conceptual or site-specific work that was less easy to contain commercially.⁴⁸

Art in SoHo, a publication from 1976 spearheaded by Alloway’s Stony Brook students (Alloway taught there from 1968 to 1981), contains charts and detailed information pinpointing the spread of galleries in the neighborhood. The cover of the booklet shows a zoning map of SoHo with the title “Art in NY SoHo,” emphatically crossing out *NY* and replacing it with the more specific region (fig. 5). The interior includes bar graphs detailing the paucity of art magazine coverage of shows in SoHo, the culmination of quantitative analysis regarding the dismally small number of reviews published by major publications. For instance, according to the students’ statistics, during the period from September 1974 to June 1975, less than a quarter of the exhibition reviews in *Artforum* were about spaces in SoHo. Here Alloway’s students have produced an incisive and clearly documented study in the anthropological vein of the disproportionate

Fig. 5.
Cover of *Art in SoHo*,
publication by students at
State University of New York
at Stony Brook, 1976.

Los Angeles, Getty Research
Institute.



attention paid to blue-chip galleries, commercial dealers, and major museums, along with an exposé of the complicity of critics in these interlocking regimes of publicity. As stated in the booklet's introduction, "this publication is the result of our recognition that SoHo's emergence as an art center has not been accompanied by matching art criticism."⁴⁹ Alloway's students grasp how art magazines and their critics were trapped in an outdated model, refusing to keep current with the flood of alternative art activity rushing into freshly developed locations. Alloway himself hoped that the buzz of activity in locations like SoHo would eventually shift the focus away from a small handful of uptown museums.

At the same time, rather than looking for their own piece of the art institutional pie, some feminists were withdrawing, at least partially, from the conventional museum economy. Some early 1970s feminist art practices openly attempted to resist the dominant art market. The founding of the Feminist Art

Program and Womanhouse in California (1971–72), for instance, offered a radical challenge to pedagogy and to structures of display. Just as conceptual artists were making works critical of art magazines and museums that were meant to exist within those very spaces, many feminists were actively establishing alternative networks of distribution, such as *Feminist Art Journal*, and starting collaborative, nonprofit art spaces, including the first all-women cooperative gallery, A.I.R., founded in 1972.⁵⁰

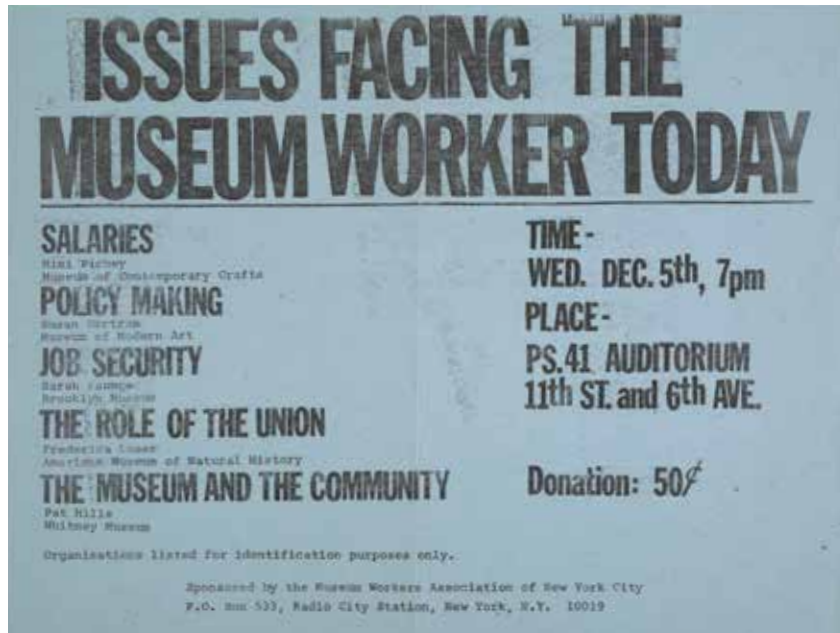
Unionization

Among Alloway's major contributions to criticism at this moment was not only his willingness to venture to out-of-the-way alternative galleries, SoHo cooperatives, and feminist spaces but also his sustained attention to issues of museum staff professionalization and unionization. In preparation for articles such as "Museums and Unionization," published in *Artforum's* special issue on museums in February 1975, he drew from research he conducted around the country, interviewing staff and collecting documents that included employment contracts, union constitutions and bylaws, collective bargaining agreements, memos of negotiation, and charts of salary standards. He also attended gatherings of museum staff that were organized by the newly formed Museum Workers Association of New York and were meant to create solidarity across different institutional affiliations. One such assembly, convened in the early 1970s, "Issues Facing the Museum Worker Today," covered the following issues: salaries, policy making, job security, the role of the union, and the museum and the community (fig. 6).

Alloway was keen to track the formation of such groups, as well as staff associations at the Whitney, the Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, all of which he documented at great length. He was especially interested in the professionalization of museum work, the gendered aspect of some facets of museum staffing, and what impact unionization might have on class identities. As he wrote in "Museums and Unionization," "the absence of blue-collar workers from museum groups is linked to the preference for forming associations rather than unions."⁵¹ In this article, Alloway gets explicit, naming museum heads, discussing salaries, and wondering if newly professionalized groups such as clerical employees might forge solidarity with, say, high-level curators.

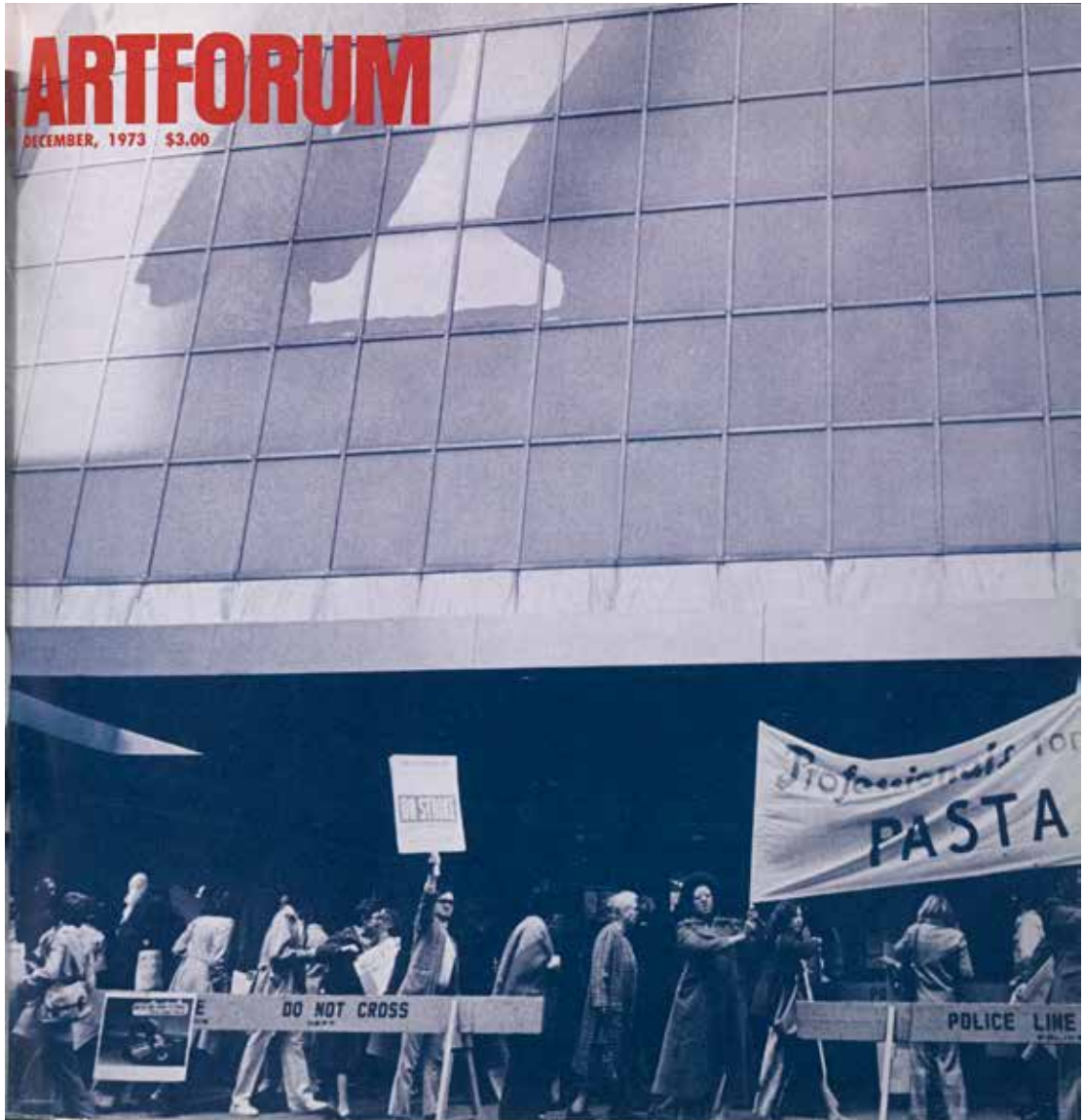
The question of how to organize effectively across social classes became especially tricky in the case of MoMA's staff union, the Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA). PASTA had been created in 1971, drawing from the AWC's momentum to recognize all forms of artistic labor

Fig. 6.
 "Issues Facing the Museum Worker Today," flier for event sponsored by the Museum Workers Association of New York, ca. 1973. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.



as *work*, and it undertook its second serious strike in the fall of 1973, in part to negotiate for a salary increase but also to advocate for greater staff input into policy and more transparent decision making. PASTA asked for a staff representative to be appointed to the controlling board of trustees and hoped to include all curators in the bargaining unit. It was this last demand that proved especially contentious, as the board refused to recognize curators—whom they understood as management—as part and parcel of the “workers” of the museum. To include curators in a group along with the staff that assisted them was perceived as a conflict of interest, but MoMA curators pushed back on this front, writing that “there is an implied lack of respect for the curatorial function in the suggestion that curators are managers.”⁵²

In the December 1973 issue of *Artforum*, which featured a photograph of the MoMA picket line on its front cover (fig. 7), Alloway and Coplans conducted interviews with PASTA members. Here questions of the disadvantages and the benefits of unionizing are explicitly addressed: “Don’t you think it might have been more relevant for the PASTA not to have got into the classical trade union situation?”⁵³ Underpinning this particular question is the presumption that unions are a touch old-fashioned, and with their focus on manual labor, unsuited to the needs of museum workers. In fact, there was friction between trade unionists and PASTA members, as demonstrated by an unpublished letter to the editor of *Artforum* written by Peter Dworkin, a MoMA preparator and member of Local 30 iUOE, in the wake of Alloway’s “Museums and Unionization”:



Alloway fails to mention what I consider to be a crucial component of the labor-management relationship in art institutions: the relationship between the professional associations and the blue collar unions. Here at MOMA, the Professional and Administrative Staff Association continually betrays an elitist attitude born of intellectual delicacy which seems to preclude a liaison between PASTA and the trades. . . . Although PASTA had made one or two desultory attempts at initiating a dialogue with trade union members, it has yet to demonstrate a willingness to adopt a continuing policy of cooperation and respect, without which it must always remain a frustrated and incoherent amalgamation of diffident

Fig. 7.
Cover of *Artforum*, December 1973, featuring a photograph of PASTA MoMA strike. From *Artforum* 12, no. 4 (December 1973).

dissidents, waving toy swords at an increasingly sophisticated managerial arsenal.⁵⁴

Dworkin starkly condemns the white-collar professionals within PASTA for maintaining stubborn divisions between themselves and those in the blue-collar trade unions. With this letter, Alloway's suspicion about the limits of such organizing efforts was confirmed, especially given the rigidity of museum structures.

The Present Complex

Despite such disenchantments and tensions, Alloway remained committed to the idea that artists could break out of the museum stranglehold to shake up contemporary culture. As Courtney J. Martin has perceptively written: "The art world was a 1960s thing that met its end with the downturn in the consumer market, the desire for artists to make objects that responded to a different set of circumstances, museums' inability to reconceive themselves in relation to new art, and a general discontent with the gallery system. Both nostalgic and forward looking, Alloway called for artists in the 1970s to 'make a real difference.'"⁵⁵ He also hoped that critics, curators, and students might "make a real difference." By turning his attention to questions of institutional currency, Alloway pointedly reshaped the role of the art critic. Alloway has long been understood as someone whose interest in the "network" of the art world bled into journalistic modes of writing; in the early 1970s, he further widened his scope to include anthropological analyses in which his own implication in the systems he described was explicitly addressed.

Without the wisdom of hindsight, how could any scholar or critic begin to describe seismic shifts in art, societal values, and politics, especially during the volatile period of U.S. history in the late 1960s and early 1970s? Producing a series of dispatches from the field of crucial cultural battlegrounds, he spoke from the position of a participant-observer in the museum/gallery/magazine network, fully aware that his affective stances, judgments, and interests, though created in the short-term art history of the here and now, would be resolved only in the long-term future. Alloway's work suggests that, given a complex present marked by upheavals within museums, protest movements, and alternative practices, only a blunt admission of our nervousness about—and our complicity within—the "present complex" will provide the possibility of remaining current.

Notes

1. Lawrence Alloway, "Whitney (seminar) 16 May 1974," typed notes, Lawrence Alloway Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, acc. no. 2003.M.46, box 27, folder 31.
2. Writings include Alloway's regular "Art" column for *The Nation*, as well as "Network: The Art World Described as a System," *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972): 28–32; "Strike at the Modern," interviews between Lawrence Alloway, John Coplans, Susan Bertram, Jennifer Licht, Joan Rabenau, and Jane Fluegel, *Artforum* 12, no. 4 (December 1973): 41–47; "Museums and Unionization," *Artforum* 13, no. 6 (February 1975): 46–48; and "The Great Curatorial Dim-Out," *Artforum* 13, no. 9 (May 1975): 32–34.
3. Donald Kuspit, preface to Lawrence Alloway, *Network: Art and the Complex Present* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), xiii.
4. Lawrence Alloway, "The Complex Present," *Art Criticism* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 32–41.
5. James L. Reinish, "An Interview with Lawrence Alloway," *Studio International* 186, no. 958 (September 1973): 63.
6. Alloway also used this term in the title of a collection of his essays, *Network: Art and the Complex Present*.
7. Lawrence Alloway, "Anthropology and Art Criticism," *Arts Magazine* 45, no. 4 (February 1971): 22–23.
8. It is notable, then, that the academic school of the "sociology of art" was in the midst of being consolidated at this moment. See, for instance, Hanna Deinhard, *Meaning and Expression: Toward a Sociology of Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).
9. I considered putting "anthropological" in scare-quotes throughout this essay as a reminder that Alloway displays only a *resonance* with the field, rather than rigorously deploying its techniques. There is a broad literature about the so-called reflexive turn that occurred in anthropology around 1970, a development that had repercussions for the whole of cultural anthropology, not least in relationship to postcolonial and feminist methodologies. For one helpful overview that was written at this moment, see Bob Scholte, "Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology," in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 430–49.
10. Lawrence Alloway, "The Long Front of Culture," *Cambridge Opinion* 17 (1959): 24–26; reprinted in John Russell and Suzi Gablik, eds., *Pop Art Redefined* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 41–43.
11. Lawrence Alloway, "Art and Politics: A New Place," handwritten, undated notes, Alloway Papers, box 10, folder 11.
12. On Frank Bowling, one of the artists in *5 + 1*, and his relationship to Alloway, see Courtney J. Martin, introduction to *Frank Bowling: Paintings 1967–2012*, exh. cat. (New York: Spanierman Modern, 2013).
13. Lawrence Alloway, with Sam Hunter, introduction to *5 + 1*, exh. cat. (New York: State University of New York at Stony Brook Art Gallery, 1969), n.p.
14. Lawrence Alloway, "Smithsonian Institution 21 February 1974," typed notes, Alloway Papers, box 27, folder 37.
15. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 13 March 1972, 349.

16. Stephen Moonie, "Mapping the Field: Lawrence Alloway's Art Criticism -as-Information," *Tate Papers*, no. 16 (1 October 2011), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/mapping-field-lawrence-alloways-art-criticism-information>.
17. Alloway, "The Great Curatorial Dim-Out," 34.
18. Alloway, "The Great Curatorial Dim-Out," 32.
19. Avram Kampf, "What Ails the Jewish Museum: An Institution Adrift," condensed from *Judaism, The Jewish Digest*, April 1969, 41–53; Emory Douglas, "To All Progressive Artists Who Are Struggling against the Racist US Government . . . World Enemy Number One," *The Black Panther*, Saturday, 29 August 1970, 20.
20. Ray Vickers, "No Easy Answers: Solutions to World Monetary Woes Appear Far Away as 'Group of Ten' Partners Meet," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 1971.
21. Joshua C. Taylor, "Why Should Anyone Go to Museums Anymore?," *New York Times*, 30 September 1973.
22. National Endowment for the Arts, *Museums USA: Highlights*, brochure (New York: National Endowment for the Arts, 1973), 19.
23. J. Michael Montias, "Are Museums Betraying the Public's Trust?," *Museum News* 51, no. 9 (May 1973).
24. Alloway, "Network: The Art World Described as a System," 31.
25. For more on the Art Workers' Coalition, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
26. See, for instance, Alloway's columns in *The Nation*, 19 October 1970, 381; and 30 November 1970, 573.
27. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 23 February 1970, 221.
28. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 30 June 1969, 837–38.
29. Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 30 June 1969, 837–38.
30. Alloway wrote about how the Art Workers' Coalition's My Lai poster was eventually printed without the promised cosponsorship of the Museum of Modern Art, *The Nation*, 19 October 1970, 381–82.
31. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Still Relevant: Lucy R. Lippard, Feminist Activism, and Art Institutions," in *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*, ed. Vincent Bonin and Catherine Morris (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2012), 70–92; and Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 15 December 1970, 637–38.
32. Alloway, "Art and Politics: A New Place."
33. Lawrence Alloway, "Uses/Limits 3," typed, undated notes, Alloway Papers, box 27, folder 10. These were notes for three lectures, collectively titled "The Uses and Limits of Art Criticism," delivered at the Art Students League, New York, 1973, an expanded version of which was published in *Alloway's Topics in American Art since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975), 251–70.
34. Alloway cited Mannheim in "Network: The Art World Described as a System," and owned a copy of Mannheim's *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).
35. Paul Cummings, oral history interview with John Coplans, 4 April 1975–4 August

- 1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
36. Hilton Kramer, "Muddled Marxism Replaces Criticism at *Artforum*," *New York Times*, 21 December 1975.
 37. Kramer, "Muddled Marxism."
 38. Typed, undated, anonymous letter, Alloway Papers, box 15, folder 8.
 39. For more on the intense rancor between these writers, see Amy Newman, ed., *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000).
 40. Ian Burn, "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation," *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 34–37.
 41. Cummings, oral history interview with Coplans.
 42. Lawrence Alloway, "The Function of the Art Critic," *New York University Education Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1974): 28.
 43. Cummings, oral history interview with John Coplans."
 44. On the growth of cooperative galleries, see Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 9 October 1972, 316; and Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 3 January 1972, 29–30. For more on the founding of the Studio Museum and El Museo del Barrio, see Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art, New York 1965–1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York: Drawing Center; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). On the opening of the Whitney's downtown branch, see Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 26 November 1973.
 45. Lawrence Alloway, typed, undated notes on galleries, 9, Alloway Papers, box 27, folder 23.
 46. Carter Ratcliff, "Making It in the Art World: A Climber's Guide," *New York*, 27 November 1978, 63.
 47. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, 26 January 1970, 92–93.
 48. See the essay by Sleeman, this volume.
 49. *Art in SoHo*, published by the students of Art 352 (Stony Brook: SUNY Stony Brook, 1976). Alloway served as an editorial adviser.
 50. See, for instance, Marcia Tucker, "Bypassing the Gallery System" (1973), in Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 206. Alloway reviewed exhibitions at A.I.R. but came under fire for this activity because of his personal connections with Sleigh, an A.I.R. member.
 51. Alloway, "Museums and Unionization," 47.
 52. Betsy Jones and Kynaston McShine to Richard Oldenburg, cc to Mrs. Rockefeller III, 2 October 1973, Alloway Papers, box 15, folder 11.
 53. Alloway and Coplans, "Strike at the Modern," 44.
 54. Peter Dworkin, unpublished letter to the editor of *Artforum*, 4 March 1975, Alloway Papers, box 9, file 5.
 55. Courtney J. Martin, "Art World, Network and Other Alloway Keywords," *Tate Papers*, no. 16 (1 October 2011), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/art-world-network-and-other-alloway-keywords>.