

ARTISTS AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

My paper is about the Artists Union, which existed in the UK from 1972 to 1983. My interest is primarily in the AU as a historical case study in organising artists as well as in politicising cultural production. On a more personal level, as an artist, researcher and trade unionist (who was too young to be active during that historical moment), I am also asking what can be learned from the AU's successes and failures. I am asking what can be applied to the present, and what should we consign to another time? The AU brings up larger questions, beyond the scope of this text, about the role of artists and the role of labour unions, as well as the differences between organising artists and organising other workers. I will be drawing on texts by Margaret Harrison, Bart Moore-Gilbert, Avis Saltsman, Stuart Laing, and John Walker. I also interviewed four members of the AU: Conrad Atkinson, Peter Dunn, Lorraine Leeson and Avis Saltsman, and researched Avis Saltsman's archive of the AU at the Tate Britain. I will first describe the wider context surrounding the AU, then will discuss the structures, goals and some of its activities and the reasons for its demise, and then end by speculating on the implications for the present.

I will first briefly describe the wider context surrounding the Artists' Union. It was a truism that the 1970s and early 1980s were a very politicised time, in the UK and elsewhere. Union density was also much greater than it is now, but tensions also existed within the labour movement. Some of these tensions existed around gender and race, within a movement which (in an official sense anyway) had primarily focused on class as both a source of oppression and also as a politicised identity. Other tensions existed around the definition of a bargaining demand outside of wages: health and safety issues, the workplace atmosphere, and the quality of the work itself. Unions did not necessarily respect these non-wage-related demands. In a spring 2008 lecture at 56a Infoshop (a South London activist space), Brian Ashton, ex-car industry shop steward, described in a lecture how these demands were often expressed through wildcat strikes and sabotage rather than through official strikess. Ashton said that in many cases unions did not see non-wage related demands as legitimate; this focus on wages was part of a social-democratic pact with capitalism that led to reformism in terms of strategy, or worse, collaboration with management.

It is another truism that the 1970s were not only a period of political transformation; artistic practices were also being radically questioned, particularly the autonomy of the art object and the traditional isolation of the artist. In the UK, as in many other countries, the 1960s saw the expansion of field of art, to include practices such as live art, conceptual art, community art, correspondence art and various experiments with technology. There was a significant gap between cultural production as it was understood and practiced by artists, and how it was understood or supported by cultural policy. Other than through short-lived and underfunded bodies such as the New Activities Committee and the Experimental Projects Committee, these newer practices were not being supported by the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB). The ACGB tended to support traditional media, guided by the principles of formalist modernism and conventional definitions of high culture; as a result, these practices received very little funding. This pointed to the need for artists to engage directly with cultural policy, and to consider it as a site for self-determination. Another motivation to engage with cultural policy, besides pushing for support for avant-garde practices, was a politics of cultural democracy. This was exemplified by the following quote from Su Braden, which Stuart Laing cites in his essay on culture in the 1970s:

People make culture and it is in this continually developing movement that money should be invested, rather than in the Arts Council's notion of trying to make people cultured (Laing: 1994:64).

Cultural democracy also guided arts policy of the Greater London Council (GLC) and other metropolitan councils, as well as the work of individual artists, who made work about very localised political struggles: hospital closures, antigentrification campaigns, etc. As John Walker described in *Left Shift*, struggles over the role and purpose of culture also took place in art education. (Walker: 2002:57-64). Conceptual artists got teaching jobs and put their ideas of art and pedagogy into practice, although John Latham of Artist Placement Group, as well as David Bainbridge and Michael Baldwin of Art and Language eventually lost their posts (Walker: 2002: 57-58). At the same time as theory was being introduced into art school, ironically with the goal of raising the academic standing of fine art education, but the result was that it led students to question the role and function of art, and in one case, write essays instead of producing artworks, to the alarm of art

school management (Walker: 2002: 58). The historical backdrop to this was the restructuring of arts education; art schools were being amalgamated into polytechnics and more exclusionary prerequisites were being applied. In response to the presence of radical teachers (who encouraged them to ask questions), changes to arts education, and the beginnings of the punk movement, students in the early 1970s made magazines which combined theory with the aesthetics of fanzines. These magazines published some trenchant critiques of art institutions, the mediocrity and corruption of some of the staff, and their implication within capitalism. In some cases this led to 'censorship, academic failure and expulsion', as in the case of Stuart Semark, a student in the Environmental Media course at the Royal College of Art, who was told by the Rector, that 'you're not here to think, you're here to work' (Walker: 2002:60).

A related issue was that in the 1960s and 1970s saw the expansion of arts education, with the result that many more people from working class backgrounds were studying art, and wanted to bring in their own experiences into their art practices, which in some cases meant a history of trade unionism and social activism. Producing socially engaged art was controversial as it flew in the face of one of the key principles of formalist modernism: that art that engaged in politics was no better than propaganda. As mentioned previously, it is a truism that the events of the time meant that as an artist, one had to take sides, rather than taking the familiar line that art was beyond politics. To take the position of 'Art for Art's Sake' was to 'fiddle while Rome burned'. This in some ways, meant making art in support of labour and social struggles. Two key exhibitions in 1978 presented this work for the public: *Art for Whom?* at the Serpentine and *Art for Society* at the Whitechapel. Conrad Atkinson, one of the founding members of the AU, made projects in solidarity with particular labour struggles, such as *Strike at Brannans*, in support of the 1972 strike at Brannans' Thermometer Factory, or *Asbestos*, in connection with the campaign for compensation for iron ore workers afflicted with asbestosis. Artists also worked outside of the exhibition. For example, Atkinson also made banners for the Northern Region of the General and Municipal Workers' Union (which would become the GMB). The Poster Film Collective formed in 1971 out a group of artists, photographers and filmmakers who made posters in response to the miner's strike, the Vietnam War and the situation in Northern Ireland. In the

early 1980s the Docklands Community Poster Project was founded in response to the concerns of local residents in the development scheme.

Artists not only tried to support strikes, but considered how they might withdraw their own labour, in response to art's implication in capitalism. In 1974, the artist Gustav Metzger proposed a three year 'art strike' (from 1977-1980) in which artists would stop making art, arguing that art's close links with the state and capitalism limited its revolutionary potential, as it could never bite the hand that feeds. He also argued that stopping art production would be necessary to 'construct more equitable forms for marketing, exhibiting and publicising art in the future' (Metzger: 1974). In the 1990s, Stuart Home restaged this gesture, but arguing that it was not only institutions, but also the role of the artist itself which was implicated in capitalist society (Home: 1990). This could be read as a critique of the romanticism of Metzger's art strike, which argued that 'capitalism has smothered art' (Metzger: 1974), but did not question how artists themselves participated in this process. I should point out that these were radical performative gestures, in a sense very different from the pragmatism of the AU.

As it impacted the arts, the wider context of the time involved not only labour but also gender politics. To counter patriarchy and sexism in the art world, feminists set up many alternative organisations too numerous to mention, including: The Women's Liberation Art Workshop (1970), the Bristol Women's Group (1970), the Women's Free Art Alliance, the Women Artists' Slide Library; publications such as *Shrew*, *Spare Rib*, *Women's Report*, *Women's Voice*, *Red Rag*, *MaMa*, and exhibitions such as *Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife*, *Women and Work*, *A Woman's Place*, etc.

So within this context, the Artists Union formed in 1972 in London, after earlier informal discussions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like other labour unions, the AU had a membership, a dues system and a national executive. However, there was also a degree of decentralisation, to allow for active participation of the members, especially those outside of London. There were local branches of the Artists' Union who met, often in informal locations such as people's houses. Meetings would rotate to different cities, so that members

from those regions could participate. There were also 'working groups', or 'workshops': 1) Artists' Role in Society; 2) Media; 3) Art. Patronage, Marketing and Money; 4) Government Policy for the Arts; 4) Policy within the Trades Union Movement, 6) The Artist in Education; 7) Art, Science, Technology and Industry; 8) Women in Art; 9) Exhibitions. The workshops were where many of the debates were, but also many of the political tensions. The women's workshop was particularly important; members of the workshop founded and participated in the other organisations mentioned earlier. They also actively fought the lack of representation of women in exhibitions and on Arts Council panels. Meetings would often begin with presentations on historical women artists, and art historians such as Griselda Pollock were also involved.

The stated goals of the Artists Union were: 1) to seek affiliation to the Trades Union Congress, 2) to regulate relations between members and patrons, 3) to participate in local government, 4) to lobby for access to mass media, 5) to democratise art education, 6) to end sexual and racial discrimination in the arts, 7) to build closer ties with the trade union movement, 8) to provide members with information relating art to science, technology and industry, and 9) to examine the position of art and artists in society. Questions of gender and race were not without controversy, particularly because the Women's workshop was separatist (men were not allowed to attend). The AU was committed to representing ALL artists and promoting equality across class, race, gender and sexual orientation in its policies. However, they were not seriously engaged in any campaigns directly around racism in any concrete way because - due to the art education system - very few black artists emerged who asserted their identities as black artists in a politicised sense, until the 1980s. One important goal of the Artists' Union was to join the Trades Union Council. Connections were made with the TUC, but the Artists' Union did not have enough members to count as an independent organisation, although they maintained strong ties with T&G. However, integration with the labour movement was not just about legal or financial resources, but a reorientation of the arts towards working class struggle and away from bourgeois institutions such as museums and commercial galleries.

However, because the ACGB remained the main supporter of the arts in the 1970s (both through grants and

through the purchase of works for its collection), it became a primary target of the AU; there was little market interest in contemporary art in the 1970s and so it was less of a priority. The AU tried to lobby the ACGB to recognise a broader range of cultural expression, and also to be more transparent and publicly responsible. As the ACGB was actually banning controversial works with little explanation, freedom of expression was also an important issue. Members of the AU became involved in local government, such as the Greater London Council, the Greater London Arts Association, and the Tower Hamlets Arts Committee—and it was at this level that many of the recommendations of the AU were actually put into practice in a concrete. At the GLC, the decisions on whether or not to award funding were made in the open, so that artists affected could sit in the audience and even intervene on the decision-making process. Atkinson, in an interview, told me about a children's dance company from East London who had not received a grant. Following this, the company staged a protest, where the children actually came in and danced on the table. He said, it was like the French Revolution. It is hard to imagine this happening now, within the current managerial climate of arts funding. The AU also undertook considerable research. Avis Saltsman was the AU's librarian from almost since the beginning, and kept an archive of many of the documents. In an internationalist spirit, Saltsman also collected information on artists' organisations in other countries, as well as pieces of legislation pertaining to artists' conditions—so that they could serve as models when it came to lobbying organisations such as ACGB.

The AU was involved in many activities and campaigns, but I will concentrate on a few of them, because they draw out some of the tensions definitions of both art and labour organising. Two of these activities involved the Hayward Gallery in London, as the gallery of the ACGB. In 1972, the AU set up an information and recruiting table outside an exhibition at the Hayward gallery called *The New Art*. They were told to leave by the ACGB staff, who saw this as a form of self-promotion not connected to the exhibition. If we consider this activity from the perspective of labour organising, how different is it from leafleting at the factory gates? The ACGBs response was of course based on the belief in art's neutrality, as well as the assumption that artists are not workers. Nonetheless, the AU continued to set up their table and recruited over 100 members.

Another activity involving the Hayward Gallery was around an exhibition called Modern British Sculpture, which involved 101 artists and only two women. According to Conrad Atkinson, the Women's Workshop staged an intervention where they proposed a woman artist who worked in a similar way for each male artist (so if it was a man working with steel, they would propose a woman working with steel). Lorraine Leeson described a boycott of the an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in East London. At the time, the gallery was mainly focused on raising its international profile, under the directorship of Nick Serota (who would move on to the Tate). One vestige of its original centrality to the area was an exhibition called 'The Open', in which any artist in the East End could participate. In 1983, the exhibition was being sponsored by Barclays Bank, which at the time participated in the apartheid regime in South Africa. The AU members all refused to participate in the show, and circulated a letter calling on artists to withdraw; over 20 artists withdrew their work, and held an alternative exhibition next door in the Whitechapel public library.

The AU was also involved in drafting recommendations to the GLC, fought against changes to art school which would make it more difficult for students from working class background to attend, and lobbied for exhibition fees and resale rights (whereby the artist receives a percentage of the price when the work is sold on). This was not actually put into effect until 2000, with the EU directive on *droit de suite*.

As I mentioned earlier, the AU existed from 1972 until 1983, when it ended, due to burnout, lack of infrastructure and repeated defeats. I asked the four members of the AU I interviewed about their thoughts on the AU's demise. All of them agreed that Thatcher's assaults on organised labour made it very difficult for unions in general, let alone an organisation as small as the AU. Avis Saltsman said that if artists withdraw their labour, nobody would really notice. Lorraine Leeson said that the late 1980s saw a backlash against the politicisation of the arts in the 1970s and early 1980s which has since continued: that it was an era of individualism and get rich quick schemes, values exemplified by YBA. This also raises larger questions about the assumed connection or conjunction between avant-garde aesthetics and left politics. If in some cases, this connection could be taken for granted in the 1970s, it is difficult to do so now, which I would

argue is connected to the expansion of the contemporary art market (whereby aesthetic experimentation becomes seen and discussed in terms of stylistic innovation, or consumer novelty), but also the legitimate challenges that have been posed to modernism over the past thirty years. I would also add that discussions of class in relation to art seem to have become mainly a question of aesthetics or style (exemplified by John Roberts and Dave Beech's *Philistine Controversy*) or the overt commercialism and depoliticisation of YBA, in a way that seems detached from economic realities—ironically, at a time when the gap between rich and poor is greater than ever.

Conrad Atkinson said that people simply ran out of energy, but also, speaking for himself, had shifted his focus to organisations like the GLC. Peter Dunn had a more specific response. He said the resale rights campaign, while, if it had succeeded, would have changed the art world, also led to the union becoming drawn into a protracted bureaucratic struggle that sapped all its time and energy, at a time when the government was unsupportive, and was also being lobbied by the Bond Street commercial galleries, and also in a wider sense, was battling practically the entire labour movement, and was dealing with near economic-collapse.

I will conclude by asking, what can we learn from the AU? Does a labour union for artists remain a workable model? On one hand, unions continue to be stereotyped as irrelevant and residual organisations, vestiges of an earlier era. While on one hand, I would argue that this is largely due to the demonisation by Thatcherism and the right-wing media, the stereotype of irrelevance does contain a legitimate critique. Atkinson said that disappointment of labour movement in the 1970s was that it did not react to new forms and did not really engage with culture. For example, the TUC didn't replace their education officer, David Logan; Logan was central to the collaboration between the Labour Party Working Group on Culture and the TUC working group on cultural policy, giving artists a voice within the labour movement. Those on the right did engage with culture, such as Alistair McAlpine and Charles Saatchi, both involved with the Conservative party, who went on to dominate the visual arts. From the perspective of the present, I would agree with Atkinson. I feel

that some of the most imaginative activist strategies have come from social movements: Reclaim the Streets, Climate Camp, Plane Stupid, EuroMayDay, internet organising initiatives such as Avaaz or Moveon.org, and direct action groups such as the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and the Native Youth Movement. These social movements have also involved artists. Trade unions are now beginning to adopt strategies from social movements; the Labourstart.org news aggregator and online campaign website, as well as the National Union of Teachers' 2008 direct-action campaign against Academy schools in Wembley Park (London), are particularly interesting and successful examples. However, there is still much work to be done.

The changes affecting society in general have also affected the arts; the inequalities that existed in the 1970s have if anything gotten worse. The expansion of the art market over the past 20 years, the rise of the star curator and dealer, and the increasing role of art schools as a launch pad for an art market hungry for fresh young talent also cannot be underestimated. Arts-related jobs and funding have become scarcer and more competitive, despite the hype over the last ten years about the creative industries. Several theorists, notably Andrew Ross and Pierre-Michel Menger, have observed that the typical conditions of the cultural sector, including hyperexploitation, casualisation and extreme competition, have become generalised to other sectors of the workplace. What this suggests is that the need for collective action is more urgent than ever.

One of the questions I asked the interviewees was what today's version of the AU might look like. Avis Saltsman suggested lobbying on an international level such as the EU, and making use of the internet to share information internationally. She said her archive of the AU was intended to preserve something for the future. Peter Dunn said that artists could only have leverage through a larger organisation representing the cultural industries, as visual artists as a group were too small and marginal. For me the AU serves as a reminder, at a time of celebrity hype and cutthroat competition, that artists can think and act collectively. Remembering these possibilities is crucial if we are to imagine a viable future.

WORKS CITED:

Avis Saltsman's Notes on the Artists' Union. Accessed 2008: <http://www.art-science.com/Avis/au/au1.html>
Home, Stuart. *Art Strike 1990-1993*. Accessed 2008:

<http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/features/artstrik19.htm>

Laing, Stuart. 'The Politics of Culture: Institutional Change in the 1970s'. In *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert. Routledge, 1994, 29-56.

Metzger, Gustav. *Art Strike 1977-1980*. Originally published in *Yawn* 38, 1974.

http://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/y_Metzger%2Bs_Art_Strike.html

Moore-Gilbert, Bart. 'Introduction: cultural closure or post-avantgardism?' In *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert. Routledge, 1994, 1-28.

Walker, John. *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*. IBTauris, 2002.