

Art Workers of New York, Unite!

by Tiernan Morgan on December 11, 2015



The poster for "Just Cause: Bad Faith – Art Workers' Activism and Organizing in NYC and Beyond" (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

"We're like the roadies of the art world," states Shane Caffrey in his 2010 [video announcement](#) for the first [Art Handling Olympics](#). "It's not an art piece, it's a community event ... it's a thing for a community that has never really had any chance to get together."

Displayed on a wall-mounted iPad, Caffrey's announcement is one of handful of artworks and ephemera included in [Just Cause: Bad Faith – Art Workers' Activism and Organizing in NYC and Beyond](#), a small exhibit spotlighting the activities of New York's artist-led activist groups. The show is a collaboration between the Interference Archive and the [Art Handlers Alliance of New York](#) (AHA-NY), a group dedicated to the protection of art handlers rights.



A selection of books from the Interference Archive library (click to enlarge)

New York has a rich history of artist-led activism, from groups such as the [Art Workers' Coalition](#) (AWC), who are widely credited with the introduction of free entry days at New York's museums, to [W.A.G.E.](#) (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), an advocacy group that continues to campaign vigorously for the payment of artist fees by nonprofits. The exploits of New York's activist groups are documented in a timeline that stretches across the entirety of one of the exhibition's walls.

The AWC is regularly cited in discussions of artist-led activism (largely thanks to Lucy Lippard's documentation of the group's activities), though its

antecedents included organization's such as the Artists' Union (1933–42) and the John Reed Club (1929–35), both of which are name-checked in the exhibition's timeline. This chronology is complimented by Antonio Serna's "Documents of Resistance: Timelines" (2015), a pair of visual timelines mounted upon tabletop trestles. Serna's collection of collaged photographs specifically documents the activist history of artists of color. Neither display is comprehensive, but together they give a taste of the continuum from which contemporary activist groups operate.

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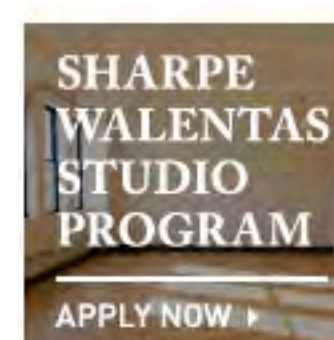
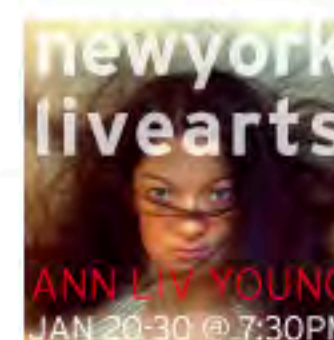
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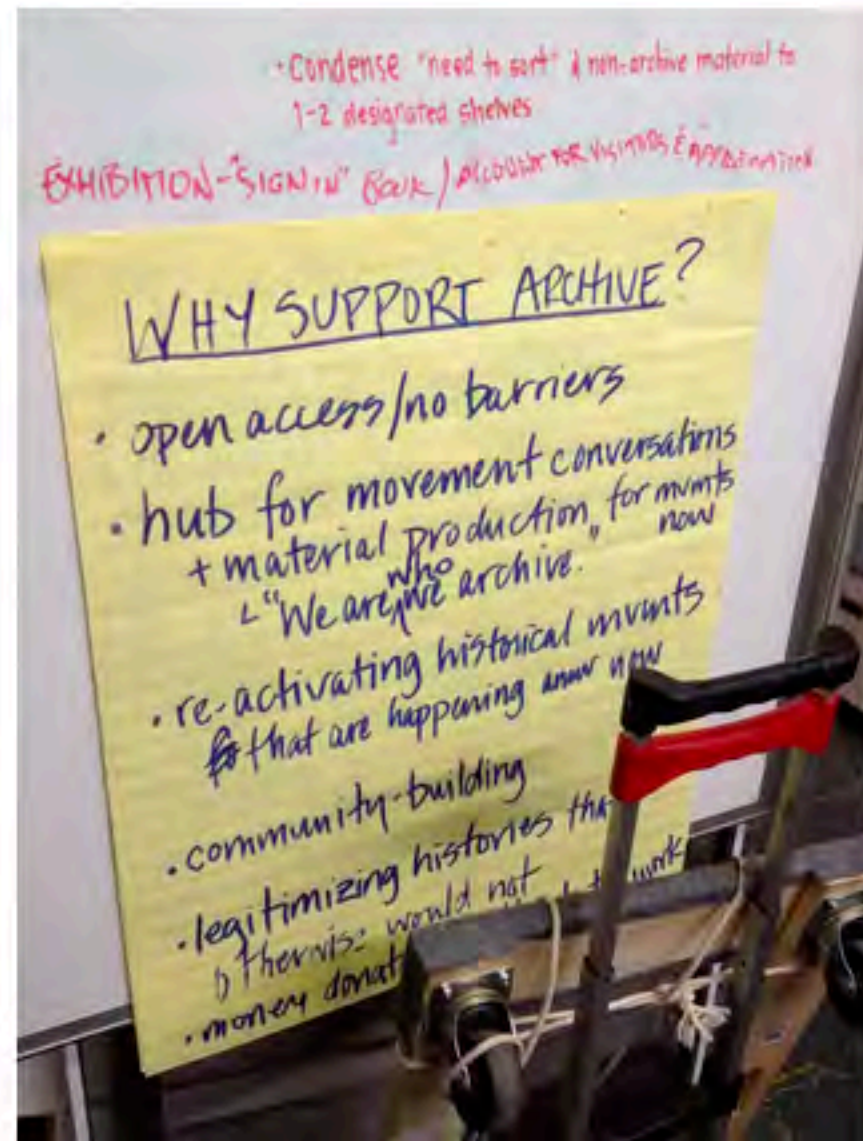
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Despite the nods to New York's activist history, *Just Cause* is primarily concerned with foregrounding contemporary organizations such as AHA-NY, [Teamsters Local 814](#), and W.A.G.E., who together dominate most of the space. An entire wall is dedicated to ephemera from the 2011 Sotheby's lockout, the ten-month labor dispute during which art handlers represented by the Local 814 union refused to agree to concessions demanded by the auction house. A settlement was eventually reached after Sotheby's dropped Jackson Lewis, a law firm held in low esteem by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The union's placards utilized the image of Edvard Munch's "The Scream" (1893). Ironically, Leon Black purchased one of Munch's pastel renditions of the painting at [Sotheby's](#) for just under \$120 million in May 2012 — a month before the art handlers dispute was eventually settled.



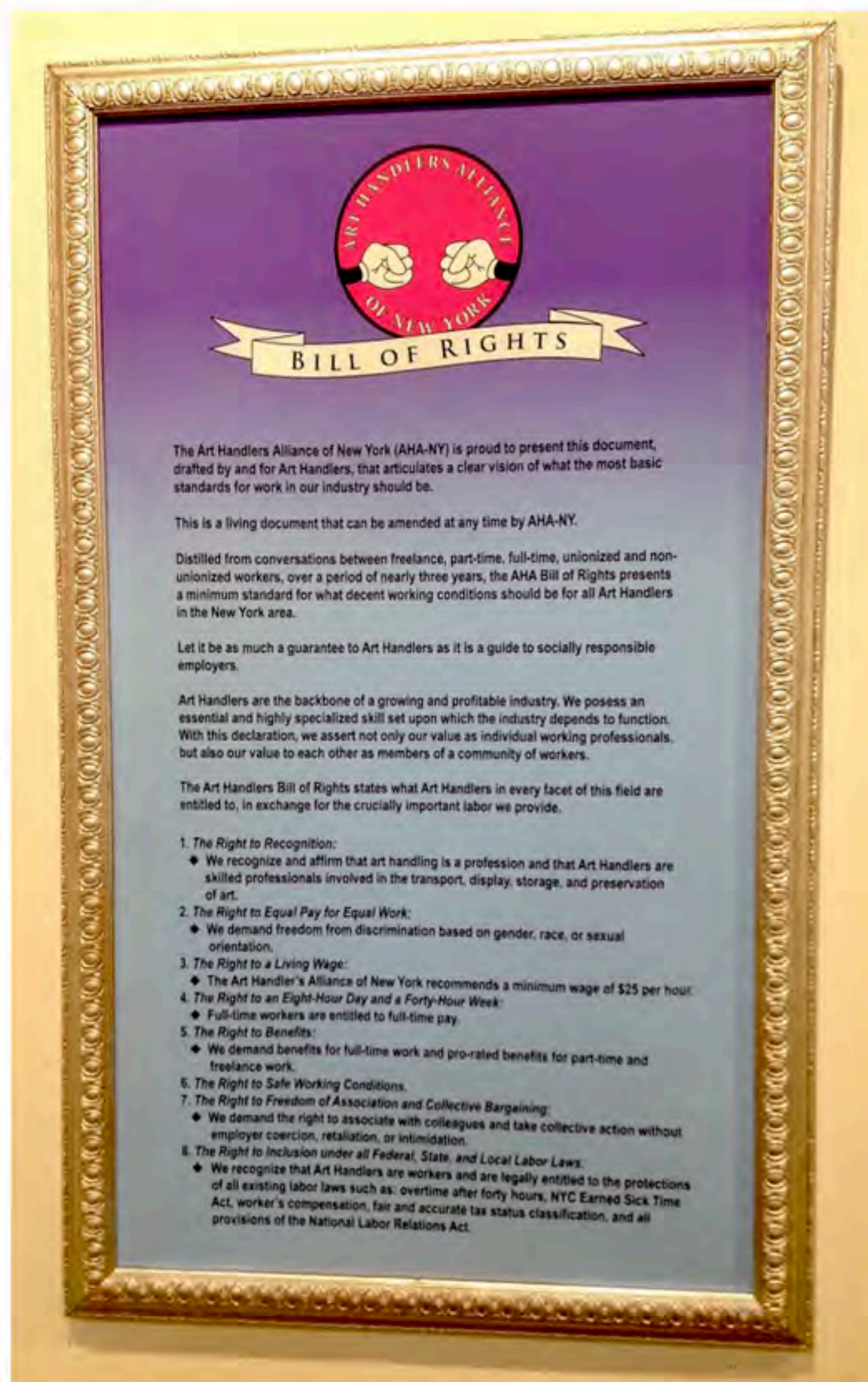
A work board inside the Interference Archive's office (click to enlarge)

Humor is a recurring motif throughout the exhibition. As well as clips from the Art Handling Olympics, the exhibition also includes the 2015 New York City Freelance Art Handlers calendar (a copy of which is proudly displayed at Hyperallergic HQ). Suspended from the ceiling is Clynton Lowry's "Custom Moving-Blanket jacket" (2013), which is described as an example of "fashionable utilitarian workwear for the urban artist/nomad." Lowry is the founder and editor-in-chief of [ART HANDLER Magazine](#), copies of which are available for visitors to peruse.

One of the most engaging artworks on display is Jo-Anne Balcaen's "Job Titles by Rank and Alphabetical Order, Version 2" (2015), in which viewers are invited to

edit two columns listing various museum positions. The column on the left lists job titles by perceived rank, whilst the column on the right lists the same positions in alphabetical order. A visitor had scrawled "intern" at the bottom of the first column, which left me wondering whether Balcaen had knowingly omitted the position from her list.

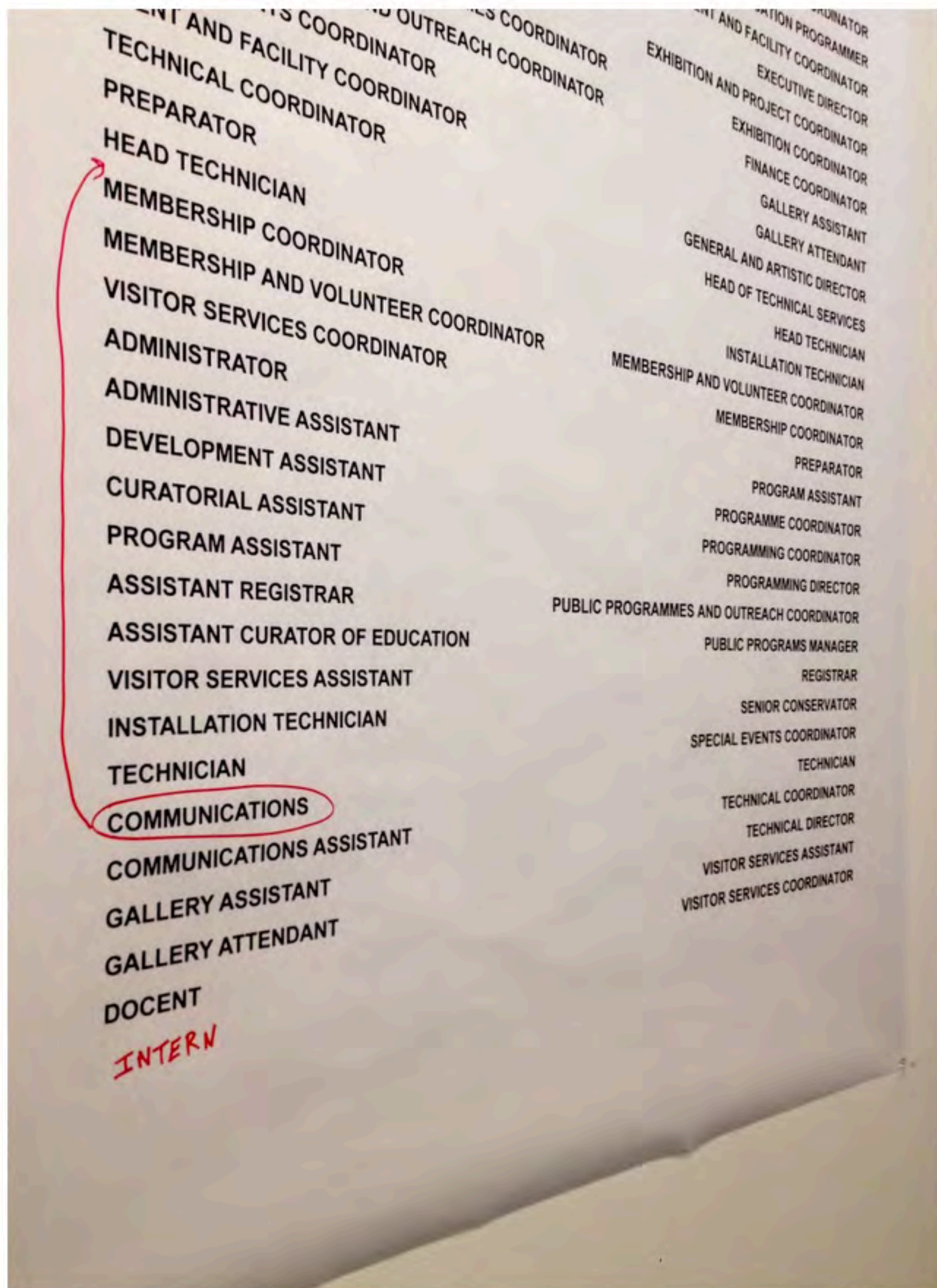
During the opening of *Just Cause*, I briefly popped into the Interference Archive's library and open stacks collection. Founded in 2011 by artists and activists Kevin Caplicki, Molly Fair, Dara Greenwald, and Josh MacPhee, the Interference Archive is dedicated to "explor[ing] the relationship between cultural production and social movements." Its archive includes books, flyers, posters, audio-visual recordings, photographs, and even T-shirts. The nonprofit space, which is entirely volunteer run, accepts both monetary and archival donations. Open every Thursday through Sunday, the archive is available to anyone who wishes to browse its collection. "There are no white gloves," co-founder [Josh MacPhee](#) told *The New York Times* in a 2013 profile. "Anyone can come in and take something off the shelves and use it."



The Bill of Rights of the Art Handlers Alliance of New York (AHA-NY)



Neal Vandenbergh, "The Equality Rule" (2015), vinyl, graphite, resin on panel



A detail of Jo-Anne Balcaen's "Job Titles by Rank and Alphabetical Order, Version 2" (2015)



The 2015 New York City Freelance Art Handlers calendar



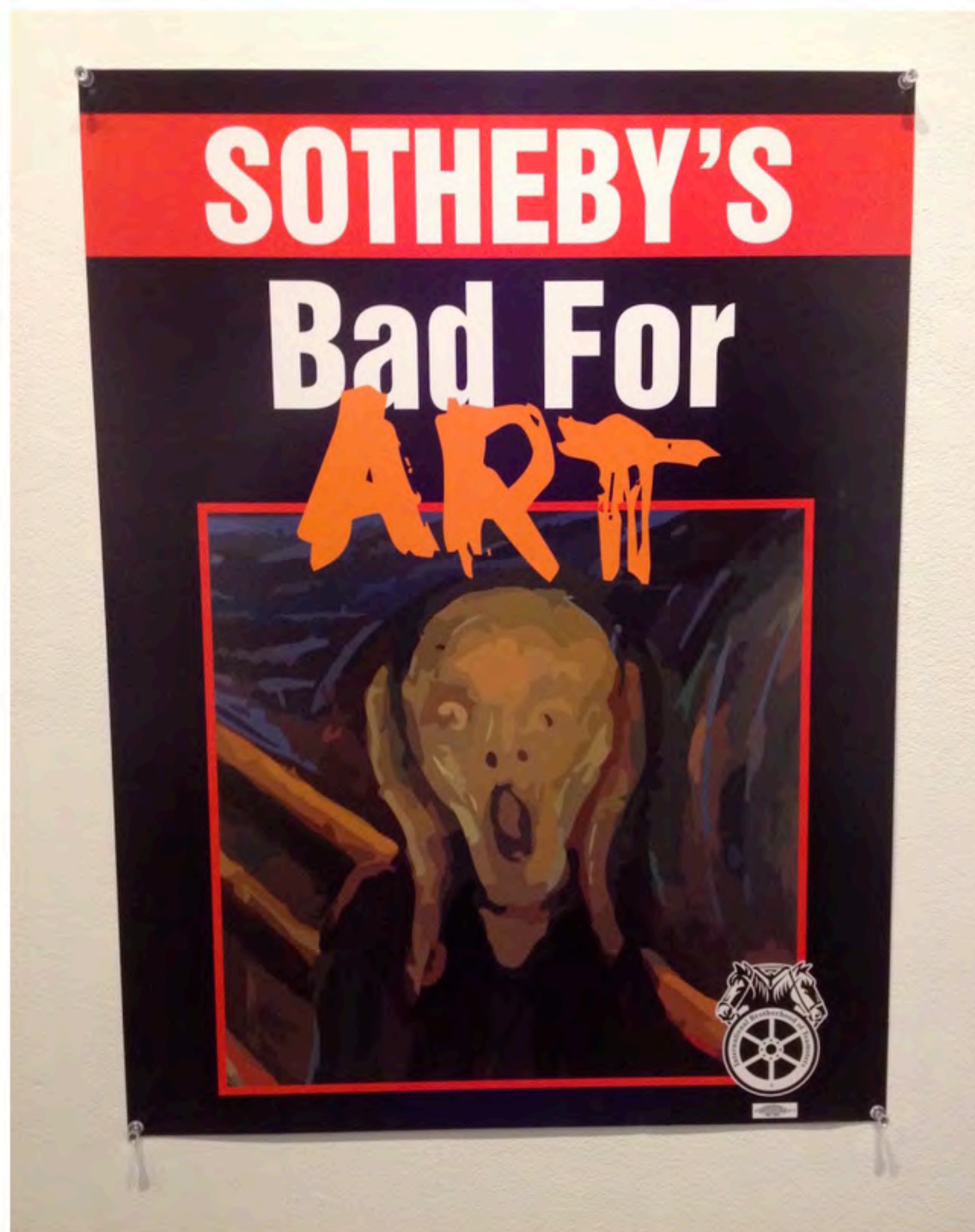
Sample issue of ART HANDLER Magazine



Installation view of "Just Cause: Bad Faith – Art Workers' Activism and Organizing in NYC and Beyond" (December, 2015), Interference Archive, Brooklyn



Clynton Lowry, "Custom Moving-Blanket Jacket" (2013), sewn, altered moving blanket



A placard designed by Teamsters local 814 for the 2011 Sotheby's lockout



Installation view of Antonio Serna's "Documents of Resistance: Timelines" (2015), collage and acrylic paint on paper. Jo-Anne Balcaen's "List of Job Titles by Rank and Alphabetical Order, Version 2" (2015) can be seen in the background



Detail of Antonio Serna's "Documents of Resistance: Timelines" (2015)

Art Worker's Coalition Timeline

1968

- Fall Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis meet with curator Allan Schoener to protest the exclusion of black artists from the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind*.
- Nov 17 Romare Bearden, Jean Hutson and Benny Andrews organize a protest against the Met Museum and *Harlem on My Mind*
- Nov Initial planning meetings begin for the Art Workers Coalition: Takis, Wen-Ying Tsai, Hans Haacke, Len Lye, Tom Lloyd, Willoughby Sharp, John Perrault, and Gregory Battcock

1969

- Jan 3 Takis Vassilakis and friends remove Takis's Sculpture *Tele-Sculpture (1960)* from *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Before guards could intervene Takis and friends lifted work off of pedestal, pulled down the two overhead revolving forms and carried the parts to the museum's garden. The exhibition curator had shown the piece against the artist's will, and installed it poorly. Artist and supporters met w/ director Bates Lowry for an hour.
- Jan 9 The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) forms in Benny Andrews studio
- Jan 12 The BECC picket *Harlem on My Mind* at the Met Museum
- Jan 28 Art Worker's Coalition (AWC) releases *13 Points*, a statement of principles and demands
AWC and BECC membership begins to overlap
- Jan 28 AWC members propose open hearings at the MoMA.
- Feb 14 MoMA director Bates Lowry counter-proposes hearings with a 'special committee on artist relations'.
- Mar 22 AWC protests at MoMA for free admission
- Mar 30 AWC protests MoMA in lobby and pickets
-free admission
-a Martin Luther King Jr. wing for Black and Puerto-Rican artists
-extension of the museum into city communities, including communities of colour
- Apr 13 Black and Puerto Rican students assemble in MoMA auditorium to evaluate if the MoMA is 'doing it's job' in representing art by artists of colour
- Apr 14 AWC hosts an Open Hearing at the School for the Visual Arts. Audience of 250 hears 50 speakers. Remarks collected and distributed as pamphlet *Open Hearings*
- April 24, BECC meets with Whitney director John I. H. Baur and other administrators of the Whitney to discuss its professed commitment to representing artists of all races, prompted by the Whitney exhibition *The 1930's: Painting and Sculpture in America* (October 15-December 1, 1968) which excluded black artists.
- April BECC meet with representatives from MoMA to discuss the exclusion of Black artists in a memorial exhibition for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,
AWC weekly meetings at the *Museum Space* co-op gallery.
- May 31 Bates Lowry resigns as director of the MoMA

Detail of a timeline outlining the activities of the Art Worker's Coalition (1969-1971)



An issue of 'Art Front,' the magazine of the Artists' Union (January 1937). On loan from MoMA



A placard designed by Teamsters local 814 for the 2011 Sotheby's lockout

A performance entitled "[Fuck Individualisierungsschub](#)" by contributing artist Neal Vadenbergh, will be held on Saturday, December 12, at 7pm.

Antonio Serna will discuss his piece "[Documents of Resistance: Timelines](#)" (2015) on Thursday, December 17, at 7pm.

[Just Cause: Bad Faith – Art Workers' Activism and Organizing in NYC and Beyond](#) continues at [Interference Archive](#) (131 8th Street, Gowanus, Brooklyn) through December 31.

AHA-NY Antonio Serna Art Handler Magazine art handlers

Art Handlers Alliance of New York Art Workers Art Workers' Coalition Clynton Lowry

Interference Archive Jo-Anne Balcaen Neal Vadenbergh

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