

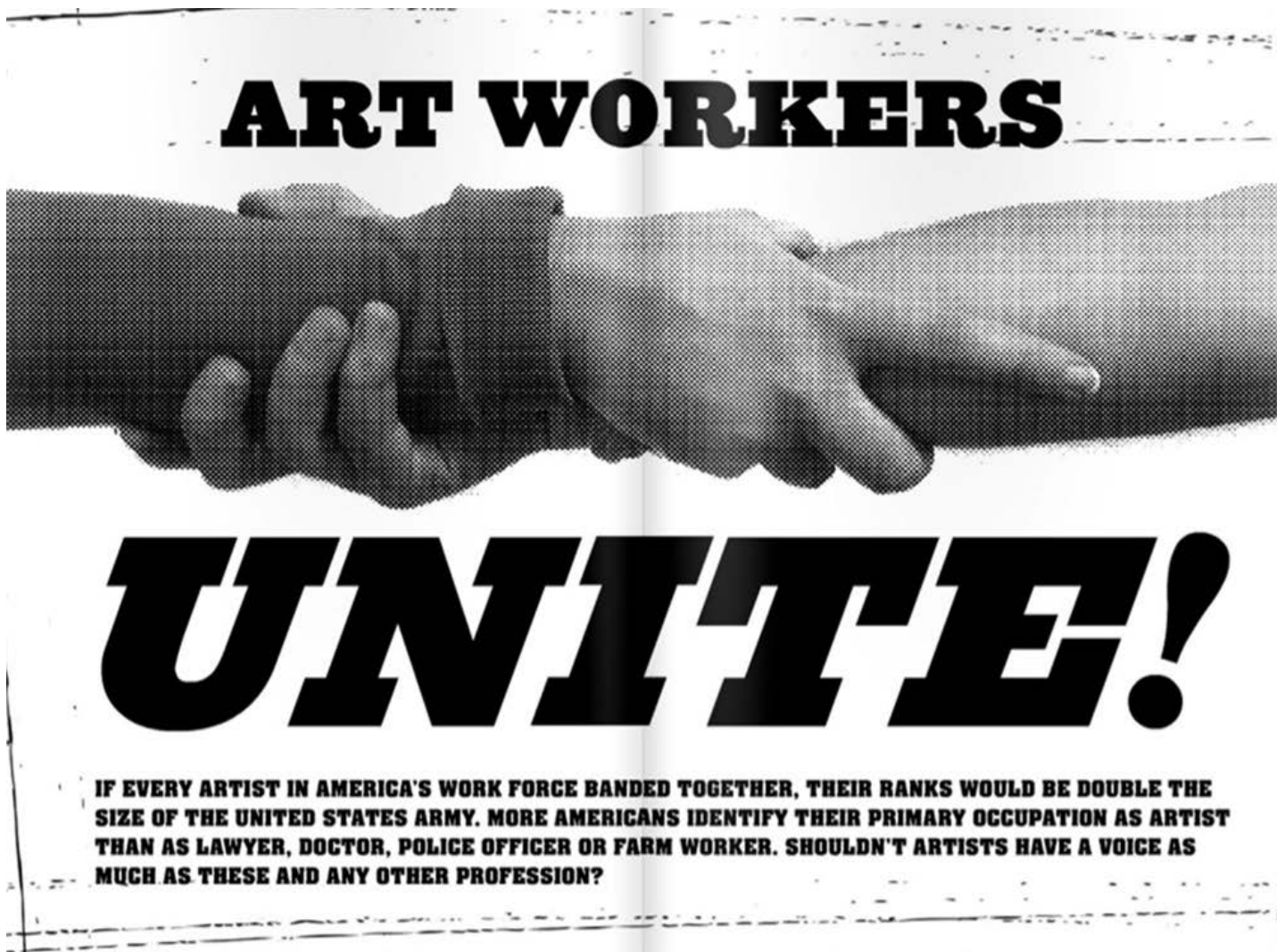
HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS

Why an Art Strike? Why Now?

The time for thinking about how the imminent political shift will impact the lives and livelihoods of artists is upon us.

Coco Fusco



An image from the Artist Bloc No. 1 zine, which was created by a group of Bay Area artists, scholars and writers in 2011. The zine is available for [download at Daily Serving](#). (via Artist Bloc No. 1)

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of essays commissioned by Hyperallergic about the #J20 Art Strike that was clearly articulated in the "J20 Art Strike: an invitation to cultural institutions" letter signed by dozens of critics, artists, curators, and gallerists. The #J20 Art Strike is made in solidarity with other #J20 actions across the country that demand that business does not proceed as usual. The Art Strike asks individuals, galleries, schools, and institutions to close or commemorate the day of noncompliance.

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The time for angry laments about how offensive, tacky, racist, and sexist President Elect (ick!) Trump's behavior can be is OVER. Yes, it's painful when our issues, our values and our candidate lose out to larger forces but shit happens and complaining on Facebook about the political behemoth that hit us won't change anything. Drowning our sorrows at endless art world soirees, or burying ourselves in studios that few of us can afford are dead ends. We can't all move to Canada. So what now?

The time for thinking about how the imminent political shift will impact the lives and livelihoods of artists is upon us. Besides having to listen to a lot of stupid things Trump says and worrying about whether he is going to bring on nuclear war with a midnight tweet, we need to talk about what is going to happen to us as citizens, as inhabitants of an endangered planet and as artists. It is pretty clear that Trump's brand of politics entails curtailment of civil liberties — which directly affects artists' ability to function. Some of us are old enough to remember when the work of Jack Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, Karin Finley, Marlon Riggs, Andres Serrano, and others were the targets of right-wing legal crusades and that all those annoying trigger warning signs about adult content in today's museums are the vestiges of those skirmishes. Anyone who thinks political correctness is bad should try talking to Congress about art for a taste of real suffering.

Trump's plans for tax breaks for the rich and trashing of Obamacare is going to make life harder for most artists to stay alive. We need to think of what to do — collectively. We need to think about how to be effective and how to be relevant and stop believing, as too many artists do, that we can just find a way to sell more art and save ourselves individually. A strike might seem like a weird fit for artists who don't toil on assembly lines but let us push our imaginations beyond the clichés about what strikes are like.

Just ignore the crabby pundits who say that artists and celebrities are just grandstanding — no one can build a movement without a public airing of issues that can be recognized as collective grievances.

Helen Molesworth reminds us in *Work Ethic* that we may think of strikes as calls to halt production in order to protest wages and working conditions, but they are, in a deeper sense, a powerful way of saying NO. In an artists' metaphoric strike, she explains, art making doesn't stop, but it is withheld from the art market's system of commodification and display. Instead, artists redirect their focus — for a moment at least — to relate what they do to other economic and ideological systems. What does that mean?

American artists have, in the past, mobilized most frequently around issues pertaining to the institutions in which they work (i.e. museums and galleries), but they have also organized protests against the Vietnam War and public health policies that failed during the AIDS Crisis. Artists were central to Occupy Wall Street and helped to put the plights of distant victims of neoliberal policies and practices onto the front page of *The New York Times*. So what could happen now — even for just a day?

¹What does an anti-Trump agenda look like? For one thing, could we devote some energy to thinking about how art and artists are embedded, whether we like it or not, in economic and social networks that surround and sustain Trump? I don't mean the neo-Nazi screamers at the rallies (they are an easy target) — I mean the billionaires from Wall Street and the oil industry who are about to take over the government and privatize our public parks, schools, and hospitals, and pollute our air, soil, and water. Ivanka isn't the only one in the new political establishment with contemporary art on her walls and she isn't taking those paintings down anyway. The Wall Street financiers who stand to gain from Trump are the same ones who have thrown bundles of cash into art and have driven up New York rents to the point that most artists can't afford workspace, living space, or decent food. Can anything be done to throw a wrench in that? In the 1960s, some very savvy artists demanded more rights over what happened to their art once it left their hands and landed in museums and secondary auctions. Right now some tough-minded performers are saying NO to providing entertainment at Trump's Inauguration. Can visual artists imagine analogous ways of refusing to provide or allowing super rich Trump backers to look cool while they make our lives impossible?

As artists, we occupy a somewhat unusual and often contradictory social position in American society. The more politically minded among us tend to stress the precariousness of our working and living conditions. There is nothing wrong with recognizing our vulnerability. The majority of us struggles financially and is exploited as cheap labor whether we teach, fabricate, or answer phones in galleries. But we also, as a group, operate in proximity to extreme wealth and power. Artists have a disproportionately high degree of access to the media. Artists also have an unusual degree of access to the rich, since they, after all, are the ones who buy art and manage the business of art. We are not always afraid to use that leverage. Now is the time to come together to conceive of ways that we can organize on the basis of how we are threatened by the political landscape *and* how we can wield influence on the powerful. An artists' strike — like the [#J20 Art Strike](#) — is just one small step, even if it feels to some like taking a leap.