

The History of the *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* Poster

This vitrine contains documents and other materials chronicling the controversy that surrounded the creation of *Q. And babies? A. And babies.* The poster was to have been co-sponsored in late 1969 by The Museum of Modern Art and the Art Workers Coalition as an expression of outrage at the My Lai (Songmy) massacre.

On the morning of March 16, 1968, United States soldiers in Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, entered the South Vietnamese village of My Lai and killed more than 300 unarmed civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. As eyewitness accounts later revealed, several old men were bayoneted, praying women and children were shot in the back of the head, and at least one girl was raped and then killed. By noon that day, the entire village had been burned to the ground and its people were left dead or dying.

It was not until November of 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published his extensive conversations with ex-G.I. and Vietnam veteran Ronald Ridenhour, that the American public began to learn the details of what happened. Once exposed, My Lai became the cover story in *Time* and *Newsweek*. CBS ran a Mike Wallace interview with Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers who followed Lieutenant William Calley's order to shove villagers into a ditch and open fire.

But nothing could prepare the American public for the photographs that would appear in the December 5, 1969 issue of *LIFE* Magazine. The pictures, some of which are on view in this case, were taken by Ron L. Haberle, an army photographer who had gone to the village expecting to document a large-scale assault on a Viet Cong battalion. Instead, his graphic imagery brought home the horror of My Lai, and would later be used to convict Lt. Calley for murder.

In late 1969, Haberle's photograph of a ditch filled with Vietnamese corpses was selected for a poster to be jointly produced by The Museum of Modern Art and the Art Workers Coalition, a loose-knit group of artists, writers and filmmakers who had been calling for sweeping reforms of what they considered a corrupt art world establishment. Much of the AWC's activity that year had been directed at The Museum of Modern Art, upon whom they had imposed a list of demands that included free admission at all times and the creation of a separate gallery for black and Puerto Rican artists. In October the AWC petitioned the Museum to close its doors until the end of the war, contending that "there is no justification for the enjoyment of art while we are involved in the mass murder of people."

Discussions between MoMA and the AWC continued, however, and at a meeting later that year the pro-AWC artist Irving Petlin proposed the creation of a co-sponsored, mass-produced poster in condemnation of the My Lai massacre, an idea that met with enthusiastic support from a majority of the Museum's senior staff. The poster's design would consist of the Haberle photograph overprinted with the legend "And babies? And babies."—the shocked question put to Meadlo by Mike Wallace in the CBS interview. By mid-December the AWC had secured permission to use the photograph. Union lithographers donated their services, and paper was obtained without cost. With the color plates completed on December 18, all that remained was the Museum's approval.

On learning of the project, William S. Paley, the president of the board of trustees and chairman of CBS, refused to commit MoMA to "any position on any matter not directly related to a specific function of the Museum." Paley offered to present the matter "without prejudice" to the board of trustees at its January 8 meeting, but judged it likely they would support his decision not to put MoMA's name on the poster.

The Art Workers Coalition proceeded to publish the poster, without the Museum's imprimatur, in an edition of 50,000, which it then distributed "free of charge all over the world," including in the Museum's lobby. The AWC also staged a "lie-in" at the Museum, carrying copies of the poster in front of Picasso's antiwar painting *Guernica* and holding a vigil "for dead babies murdered at Songmy and all Songmys."

From the exhibition:
"The Path of Resistance.
MoMA meets Moderna 1960 – 2000,"
Held at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC
2001-05-19 until 2001-08-26