

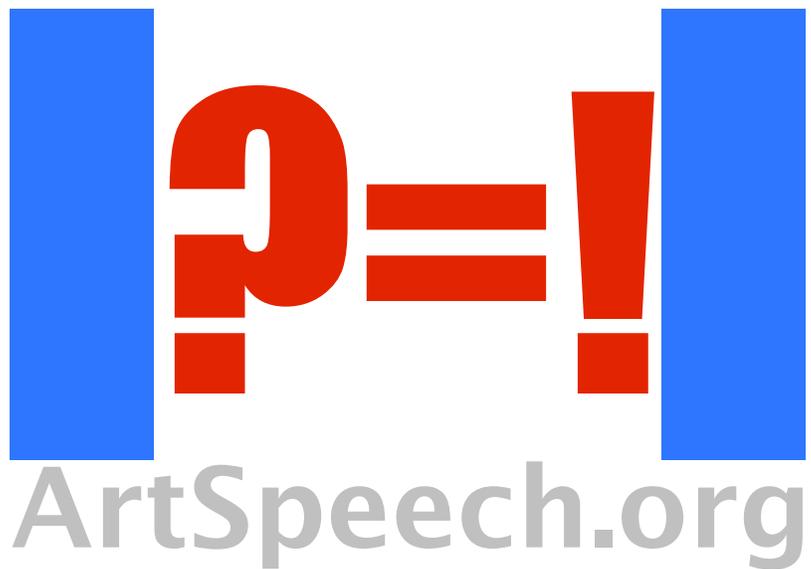
PRESS RELEASE

ArtSpeech.org

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FORMER MEMBERS OF MOBIUS ARTISTS GROUP FOUND NEW ARTS ORGANIZATION

*Milan Kohout and other former members leave Mobius in a dispute about freedom of expression.
Newly-installed artistic director Marilyn Arsem suspends all operations
for Mobius to “reconsider its mission.”*

(Boston, MA, August 17, 2020) — At a meeting on June 30th, the board of directors of Mobius, the artist-run center for experimental art that became one of Boston’s long-standing cultural institutions and an icon of experimental performance, officially dissolved the nonprofit organization that had been a mainstay of Boston’s alternative art scene since the 1970s. The organization’s website states that “the Board has suspended the activities of Mobius Inc. to reconsider its mission.”

The decision grew from a dispute about freedom of expression within the group, involving discussions about racism, homophobia, mysogyny, political correctness, and the role of art in society. At the center of the controversy is performance artist, poet, and author Milan Kohout (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan_Kohout), a Mobius Artist Group member who has a long and well-documented history of anti-racist political art-activism, including numerous performances and visual artworks that promote values of social and racial justice for the disempowered both in the USA and in his native Czechoslovakia. A victim of the communist totalitarian regime who was imprisoned for his artwork, Kohout declares himself to be a free-speech absolutist. “Under totalitarianism, I saw the horrors of suppression of free speech up close,” says Kohout. “I had to study the US constitution to become an American citizen. I take the First Amendment and freedom of expression very seriously.”

The dispute erupted partly over Kohout’s questioning of corporate sponsorship of the Black Lives Matter organization. Kohout, an ardent supporter of the principle that black lives do in fact matter, pointed out during a meeting of the Mobius Artists Group that the Black Lives Matter *organization* (as opposed to the grass-roots movement) receives millions of dollars in funding from the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation is among the wealthiest philanthropic organizations in the world, and was founded by industrialist Henry Ford, known for his actively racist, white supremacist, and antisemitic attitudes. Kohout’s skepticism of corporate sponsorship of social justice movements is shared by a wide range of black and other intellectuals such as Angela Davis, Cornel West, and Noam Chomsky. However, Kohout’s views were labelled by some in the group as “hate speech,” and the issue quickly evolved into a debate about free speech.

The unique structure of Mobius has traditionally made the Artists Group the guiding entity of the organization, with all major decisions made on a consensus basis. Artists are accepted into the group by invitation only, and generally leave the group only with their own consent. Therefore when a letter circulated among members of both the Artists Group and the Board of Directors called for Kohout to resign from the group, it sparked a chaotic fragmentation, with some members leaving the group as Kohout stood his ground, while others refused to sign the letter. Although the letter accused Kohout of being racist and homophobic, it provided no evidence. One of the artists who refused to sign the letter demanding Kohout leave the group rejected the notion that identity politics were at the core of the dispute: “My age, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation had no influence on my decision to not sign the letter. I believe the accusations in the letter are false,” wrote an artist member who preferred not to be identified.

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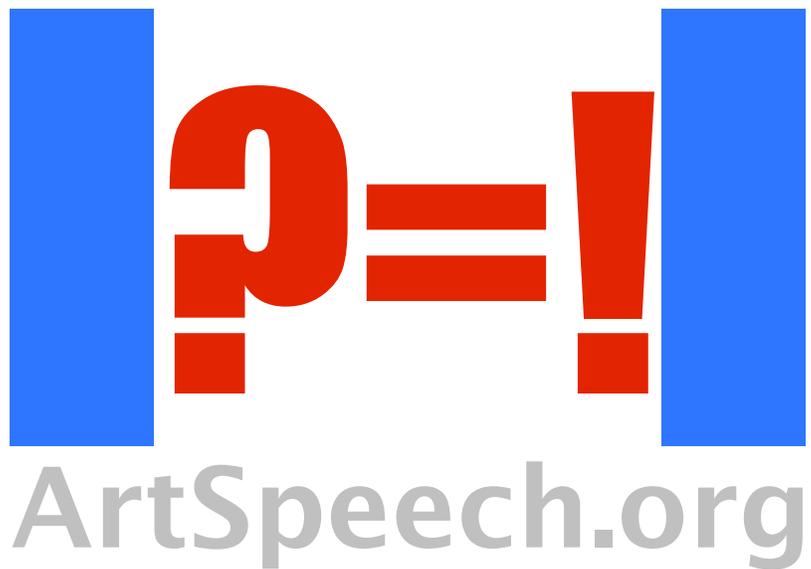
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In response, Marily Arsem, who founded the organization in the 1970s, called an emergency meeting of Mobius' board of directors, but without informing the board's president. At the June 30th meeting, the Mobius Artists Group was dissolved with the president *in absentia*, replaced by Sarah de Besche as the acting president. Arsem was installed as the artistic director, and the activities of Mobius, Inc. were suspended indefinitely to, according to an email from the new acting president, "reconsider its mission."

In a June 30th e-mail, former Mobius Board President Michael Tyrrell, highly critical of these actions, stated: "Crucial information— specifically, a draft ouster letter to artist members concerning the removal of Milan Kohout— was withheld from me while I was still serving voluntarily as President. We are reviewing the organizations bylaws of incorporation to determine if the Mobius Board of Directors violated proper procedures."

"We believe the 'emergency meeting' was called to prevent the remaining artist members from maintaining the organization. Even though the bylaws are written to ensure continuity, the other members all resigned voluntarily, and were technically stepping away permanently. Personally, I thought the way Kohout was characterized in the letter demanding he leave the group was wrongheaded, intellectually suspect, and counter-productive. I am not alone in this sentiment; Artistic freedom, indeed freedom of speech is at stake," Tyrrell stated.

Following procedures outlined in the organization's bylaws, Kohout was joined by several other artists in attempting to rebuild the Mobius Artists Group, including Zayde Buti, musician, comedian, and performance artist; James Ellis Coleman, a visual artist whose work often focuses on negative stereotypes of marginalized people in popular culture; David Franklin, experimental filmmaker, performance and visual artist whose work addresses the intersection of A.I., social justice, and global warming; Jason Outlaw, whose political stained-glass pieces challenge tradition and whose collaborative performances with Kohout have commented on diversity and the discourse around race; and Michael Tyrrell, architect/planner and urban installation artist. However, having been blocked by the Mobius' Board of Directors from continuing to operate under the name "Mobius," the artists decided to found a new organization: ArtSpeech.org. "It is our intention to continue to be as diverse and inclusive as possible. We are actively searching for new artist members to reach former membership levels or surpass them," wrote artist and founding member of ArtSpeech James Ellis Coleman in an email.

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More about Milan Kohout

Milan Kohout (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan_Kohout) is an internationally-known artist-activist and has been a fixture of the Boston performance art scene since he immigrated to the US in 1986. He had been a member of Mobius since 1994. He has a decades-long well-documented record of producing numerous artworks that oppose racism and discrimination while supporting social justice, both in his native Czechoslovakia and in his adopted homeland, the USA. Kohout is an immigrant who survived imprisonment and interrogation by the communist Czechoslovakian secret police due to his participation in

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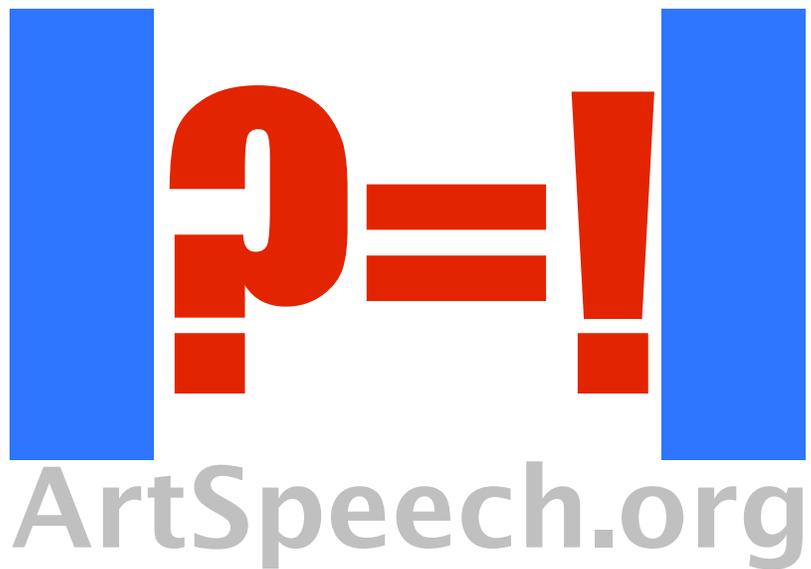
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underground art activities. He signed Charter 77 (the nonviolent Czechoslovakian human rights movement inspired by, among others, Dr Martin Luther King Jr.), due to which Kohout and many other dissident artists (including Vaclav Havel, who later became president) were imprisoned by the communist government. Kohout was interrogated, imprisoned, subsequently exiled, and eventually granted political asylum in the United States. While many other former dissidents and members of the Czechoslovakian Underground moved into high positions in government after the Velvet Revolution, Kohout continued making art both in his adopted country (the USA) and in the Czech Republic during return visits there. One of his best-known anti-racist performance actions gained international media attention in 1999 when he used art to protest a segregation wall between Romany (gypsy) and white neighborhoods in the Czech town of Usti nad Labem. The resulting international media attention shamed local officials into removing the segregation wall. This and numerous other challenges to racial oppression and social inequality are documented in his recently-published retrospective volume, *Perpetual Performer* (2018 edition Petr Štengl Publishing Prague, ISBN 978-80-87563-77-9).

Kohout's absolutest stance regarding free speech derives from his personal experiences of oppression during communism, which is in part why his artworks are consistently questioning and provocative. "In the era of the Twitter generation, people with short attention spans make snap judgements. Therefore they can easily misinterpret the message of my art. Unfortunately, these kind of knee-jerk reactions just serve the interests of the powerful. Therefore I absolutely support free speech, discussion and analysis. I want to engage with people who disagree with me. The tendency to silence and exclude dissenting voices is very destructive. Society is entering a revolutionary moment, and this is when alternative and dissenting views should be vigorously debated. I am an artist, so I use art as a tool in this dialogue. Free speech is absolutely necessary for art to exist."

More about Mobius

Mobius, founded in 1977 by Marilyn Arsem as Mobius Theater, was known as "Boston's artist-run center for experimental art in all media." Its members produced and hosted a wide range of visual, performance, installation, and intermedia artworks both as individual artists and in collaboration with other Mobius Artists Group members and other artists. The small but long-lived arts organization made a significant impact on the Boston arts landscape over the years, organizing and often hosting exchanges with organizations such as 911 Media Arts Center in Seattle, the LAB in San Francisco, as well as international projects with artists from Croatia, Macedonia, Poland, and Taiwan. Their annual ArtRages fundraising parties from the 1990s until 2007 featured multiple simultaneous performances and installations, as well as serving as a showcase for area bands and musicians such as Amanda Palmer's Dresden Dolls, Vessela Stoyanova's Fluttr Effect, and others.

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