

# THE ART STRIKE PAPERS



AK  
PRESS

The Art Strike Papers is a substantial collection of material produced in response to the Art Strike 1990-93. It is made up entirely of pieces which have appeared since the publication of *The Art Strike Handbook* in April 1989.

“The Art Strike is surely the proverbial last word in the sorry saga of anti-artism. It has the dubious virtue of providing for its own supersession by being a conscious simulation — a veritable mockery of itself. As pure negation, however, it would surely be more valuable if it were only a little more obviously insincere”

— **Mike Peters** and **Steve Bushell** *Concluding Unartistic Postscript*

“The importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war. The Art Strike addresses a series of issues: most important amongst these is the fact that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be actively and aggressively challenged... The organisers of the Art Strike have quite consciously exploited the fact that within this society what is simulated tends to become real.”

— **Stewart Home** *Art Strike 1990-1993*

“Making the Art Strike (quasi) real is a series of documents that discuss the act of negation, of not doing art... the texts serve as the simulated reality of an organised strike”

— **Anon** *Strike Out On Your Own: A Reader's Guide to Simulated Reality in the Years Without Art*

“The Strikers quote Jean Baudrillard's statement: ‘Art no longer contests anything, if it ever did.’ But does refusing to make art contest anything? If only it did.”

— **C. Carr** *The End of Everything*

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**The Assault on Culture:**

*Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*

# THE ART STRIKE PAPERS

Featuring James Manno~~x~~,  
Stewart Home, Sadie Plant,  
Nik Houghton, Mr Jones  
&c

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# INTRODUCTION

Late in the autumn of 1988, Stewart Home and Mark Pawson were prowling East London in search of Art Strike recruits. They came to visit me in Beck Road, Hackney. We discussed the social and political role of art, its effects on society and how this related to the issue of class. Having done time as an art student, my standpoint was clear, all creative action — conscious or otherwise — was by definition artistic. The concept of art should be transformed, so that all distinctions between artists and the rest of society are eradicated.

I was in favour of the Art Strike and we talked about ways in which we could promote the concept, such as picketing art openings and other forms of direct action. Stewart and Mark told me about the Art Strike Action Committee in California — and proposed that we form a British branch. I agreed to this and the ASAC (UK) was formed on the spot. I felt that bombing galleries would provide us with a dramatic way of stating our position. However, the most provocative action we undertook was leafletting sections of London's art community. The ASAC (UK) neglected direct action in favour of propaganda activities. *Vive la revolution!*

For a while, there was intense international activity. British, Irish, German and three strategically located American Art Strike groups produced and distributed thousands of propaganda leaflets, posters, comics, pamphlets, T-shirts, balloons, stickers and badges. However, despite all this activity — as far as I am aware — Stewart, Tony Lowes and John Berndt were the only individuals to strike. The ASAC (California) had always said that 'Art Strike was the worst idea ever' — and yet it was much more attractive than the 'realistic' ideas it opposed.

Minimal involvement in most of the theoretical discussions weakened the Art Strike's relevance to my everyday life. Of course, the value of any theory will fluctuate over a period of time. Many Art Strikers burned out on discussion after a while and lost their natural grasp of the issues involved. Nevertheless, I hope this book will lift its readers to heights of revolutionary ecstasy and the only efficient act of dissention — suicide. Read and destroy...

Spellings and punctuation have been standardised throughout the text: e.g. in the case of US and Canadian writers, what was originally 'labor' has been rendered 'labour', 'ize' spellings are rendered 'ise' etc. Otherwise nothing has been altered. Factual inaccuracies have been left unfootnoted and as they stand — a careful reading of the whole text will clarify most of these.

**James Mannon**, London, Summer 1991  
for the Art Strike Action Committee (UK)

James Mannon is a musician who plays with a number of today's top underground recording acts, including *Death In June*, *Current 93* and *Spasm*.

**“Art, seen in relation to its supreme destination, remains a thing of the past. It has hence lost for us what once made it true and vital, its former reality and necessity.”**

**—Hegel**

**“The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour. If, even in certain social conditions, everyone was an excellent painter, that would not at all exclude the possibility of each of them being also an original painter, so that here too the difference between “human” and “unique” labour amounts to sheer nonsense. In any case, with a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the artist to some definite art, thanks to which he is exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc, the very name of his activity adequately expressing the narrowness of his professional development and his dependence on division of labour. In a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.”**

**—Marx**

# ABOUT THE ART STRIKE

While the Art Strike was not conceived as a Mail Art project, many of the fifty or so individuals who've been engaged in propagating it have close ties with the Eternal Network. As such, it raises issues which are of pertinence to Mail Artists and points to ways in which international networking can be used to give voice to radical social perspectives.

## THE CONCEPT

The 1990 Art Strike was called as a means of encouraging critical debate around the concept of art. While certain individuals will put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit or discuss their cultural work for a three year period beginning on 1 January 1990, the numbers involved will be so small that the strike is unlikely to force the closure of any galleries or art institutions. It will, however, demonstrate that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be aggressively challenged.

Art as a category must be distinguished from music, painting, writing &c.. Current usage of the term art treats it as a sub-category of these disciplines, one which differentiates between parts of them on the basis of 'perceived values.' Thus the music of John Cage is considered art, while that of Madonna is not. Therefore, when we use the term art, we're invoking a distinction between different musics, paintings, works of fiction &c., one which ranks the items to be found within these categories into a hierarchy.

Given the diversity of objects, texts, compositions &c., which are said to be art, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is no common denominator among these 'art works' which can be used as a criterion for deciding what should or should not be considered art. What distinguishes the art object is the particular set of social and institutional relationships which are to be found around it. Put another way, art is whatever those in a position of cultural power say is art.

One of the purposes of the Art Strike is to draw attention to the process by which works of art are legitimated. Those artists and administrators who are in the privileged position of deciding what is and is not art constitute a specific faction of the ruling class. They promote art as a superior form of knowledge and simultaneously use it as a means of celebrating the 'objective superiority' of their own way of life on the basis that they are committed to art. Appreciation of art is generally used as a mark of distinction, privilege and taste.

## THE PRECEDENTS

The earliest use I've found of the term Art Strike is in Alain Jouffroy's essay 'What's To Be Done About Art?' (included in *Art and Confrontation*, New York Graphic Society 1968): "...The abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an 'active art strike' using the machines of the culture industry to set it in total contradiction to itself. The



intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adventurous part of 'artistic' production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques."

The problem with this proposal is that without ending the rule of production, avant-garde artists would simply swap one privileged role for another. Instead of providing entertainment for a privileged audience, artists are to form themselves into a vanguard providing ideas, forms and techniques for the masses. While such a role may be attractive to the artist, it does nothing to alter the oppressive domination of a so called creative elite over the rest of society.

The New York Art Strike Against War, Repression and Racism was a coalition of artists, dealers, museum officials and other members of the art community. Among other things, it called for a one day closure of galleries and museums on 22 May 1970, with optional continuance for two weeks. On that day the Whitney, the Jewish Museum and a number of galleries closed, while the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim suspended their admission charges. While some of the aims of the New York Art Strike were laudable (such as protesting against the war in Vietnam), its supporters also used it as a vehicle for strengthening the privileged position artists occupy within contemporary society. However, the New York Art Strikers soon broke into dissenting factions and their movement was moribund before the end of 1970.

The next proposal for an Art Strike came from Gustav Metzger. Writing in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Art Into Society/Society Into Art* (ICA, London 1974), he called upon artists to support a three year Art Strike which was to run between 1977 and 1980. The idea was to attack the way in which the art world was organised rather than to question the status of art. However, Metzger was unable to rally support for his plan, presumably because most artists lack any sense of the mutual self-interest which would enable them to act in solidarity with others.

In February 1979, Goran Dordevic mailed a circular asking a variety of Yugoslavian and English speaking artists if they would take part in an International Art Strike to protest against repression and the fact that artists were alienated from the fruits of their labour. Dordevic received forty replies, the majority of which expressed doubts about the possibility of putting the International Art Strike into practice. Because so few artists were prepared to pledge their support, Dordevic abandoned his plan for an International Art Strike.

In Eastern Europe, where cultural work is totally professionalised, there have been successful strike actions by artists. During martial law in Poland, artists refused to exhibit work in state galleries, leaving the ruling class without an official culture. More recently in Prague, 500 actors, theatre managers and stage directors were among those who announced a week long strike to protest against state violence. Instead of giving performances, actors proposed to lead audiences in discussions of the situation (see 'New Protest In Prague Follows Beating Death,' *New York Times* 19/11/89). However, the fact that artists are sometimes prepared to use their privileged position for what many would view as laudable ends does not place them above criticism.

## **NETWORKING THE 1990 ART STRIKE**

The 1990 Art Strike was publicly announced in a flyer I issued during the summer of 1985. Further information appeared in issues of *Smile* magazine and a succession of texts, flyers and pamphlets. The idea was pumped by John Berndt in Baltimore and myself in London. One of the earliest responses to our propaganda was a pack of "Give Up Art/Save The Starving" stickers, badges and balloons from Eire based Tony Lowes.

The Art Strike virus spread as John, Tony and I energetically promoted the concept. And so, by the end of 1988, the idea had caused something of a stir in Mail Art and other circles, but we were still lacking an organisational form with which to implement the strike. At this point, Steve Perkins, Scott MacLeod, Aaron Noble and others decided to form an Art Strike Action Committee (ASAC) in San Francisco. Fired by the initiative of these activists, I formed a UK ASAC with Mark Pawson and James Mannox. Other ASACs soon sprang up in Baltimore, Eire and Latin America.

January 1989 saw the California ASAC organise an Art Strike Mobilisation Week in San Francisco. The UK and USA East Coast ASACs then attempted saturation leafleting of art institutions and artists' housing in London and Baltimore. This tactic worked very effectively in Baltimore and led to the formation of an anti-Art Strike group. The larger and more confident art community in London was not so easily intimidated — provocative actions such as leafleting a party to mark the closure of a gallery, led to earnest discussion rather than howls of outrage.

The year continued with propaganda posters made during the San Francisco Art Strike Mobilisation Week being exhibited at two community art venues in London and then during the Fifth International Festival Of Plagiarism in Glasgow. Lectures and debates were held in various art schools and institutes both in the UK and the US. All this activity caught the attention of the media and ASAC representatives made appearances on national radio in both Britain and Eire. There was also a brief Art Strike feature on a London TV station. Written coverage of the Art Strike was more extensive with features and news stories being carried in everything from underground magazines to the *New York Village Voice*.

## **NO THEORETICAL SUMMING UP**

Since the Art Strike is located in opposition to closure, there can be no theoretical summing up of the issues involved. The time for theorising the Art Strike will be after it has taken place. Here and now, it is not possible to resolve the contradictions of a group of 'militants' — many of whom do not consider themselves artists — 'striking' against art. For the time being, the Art Strike must be understood simply as a propaganda tactic, as a means of raising the visibility and intensity of the class war within the cultural sphere.

— **Stewart Home**, London 27/12/89. Originally commissioned by Chuck Welch for his book *The Eternal Network: a mail art anthology*.

# WHEN BLOWING THE STRIKE IS STRIKING THE BLOW

*Those whose identity is based on 'their opposition' to the world as it is, have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo - Stewart Home.*

There's a lot to be said for the Art Strike, which is just as well, since between 1990 and 1993 nothing can be written or painted or performed in its support. There's something to be said against it too — no time limit here — and plenty of room for dissent.

Art Strike propaganda claims that the artists' strike will have the effect of bringing the class struggle to the artistic realm. It argues that the most radical art and the most critical artists are actually supporting capitalist social relations even when they purport to subvert them; artistic practice must therefore cease since it stabilises and nourishes the social relations its more oppositional forms claim to contest.

This argument is akin to a wider challenge made by postmodern philosophers such as Baudrillard, who argue that criticism is no longer possible and that the only efficient way of dissenting from capitalist society is to commit suicide. The *Art Strike Handbook* quotes Baudrillard: "Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything. If it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction consumed."<sup>1</sup>

Any active dissent can be commodified, turned into a product useful for the maintenance of capitalism. The slogans of revolutionary politics are used to sell bank accounts, the painting that challenges beauty and form is placed in the gallery where its beauty and form are admired and valued and bought and sold; the biting poem is read on the radio to accompany the liberal critics' display of sorrow at the state of the world. Whatever is said against can be made to speak for, like any weapon, art can be turned against those who use it.

The art strikers have emerged out of a tradition of avant-garde culture which has recognised these problems and continually agitates against what it has defined as the recuperation of criticism. In different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists and Situationists, all realised that anything they produced could be integrated into the structures they opposed. *Whatever doesn't kill power is killed by it.*<sup>2</sup>

Thus the Dadaists watched their anti-art works being categorised as works of art, and aimed their whole project at the evasion of this recuperation. After five years of agitation against capital, war and morality, they reached an impasse of suicide or silence. Everything they made or said or wrote was turned against its critical purpose and used against them. So they scrapped the whole project. In effect, like the cultural workers of the 1980s, they decided to go on strike.

The Dadaists left a legacy which has indeed been recuperated in the form of commodified works of art, the use of their techniques of collage and photomontage in advertisements, and the presentation of their work in coffee table books and university seminars. They were right to believe that this was inevitable as long as they were merely producing, and not controlling the means of production. But on the way, they did constitute a challenge to bourgeois morality, the philosophical assumptions on which it was based and the propaganda of the First World War which legitimated its brutality. In the end they felt that their subversions of established values were merely contributing to the culture they wished to destroy. The question became one of whether their participation outweighed their silence as the most effective weapon. It was not a matter of giving up the struggle, but the use of giving up as a means of struggle.

Like the art strikers, the Dadaists recognised that both art and the artist are as guilty in their participation as any other commodity or worker. This perspective has far more validity than that adopted by Marcuse and Adorno, who argued that the Dadaist project was misguided in its attacks on conventional art. They considered that art has an autonomy and distance from capitalist relations which must be preserved rather than undermined; art bears an essential negativity derived from its peculiar Form; its rearrangements of reality are conducted on principles of order quite alien to those of capitalism. This Form renders art a "refuge and a vantage point from which to denounce the reality established through domination."<sup>3</sup>

Although Adorno and Marcuse criticised the anti-artists for attacking artistic Form, they concurred with the avant-garde aim of ending the distinction between art and the rest of reality. Indeed, Marcuse wished to see a society organised according to the aesthetic principles he saw preserved in art. But they both argued that the achievement of this integration was not a task in which artists can participate. Art must remain in a realm in which calm reflection can remind us of the truths of an authentic life which will be achieved after the revolution.

Expressing their rejection of this view in different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists and Situationists, worked for the collapse of the distinction between art and the rest of life in the here and now. Rather than waiting until after the revolution, they argued that the integration of art and life was fundamental to the achievement of revolution, which is possible only because of the subjection of capitalism to continual assault on all fronts: ideological, cultural and economic.

If art is an area of contestation like any other, it is also an area of integration and recuperation. The Art Strike is a recognition of this double role: it brings industrial struggle to art, challenges artists to jeopardise their careers and identities in the same way as other striking workers, and demands that those who continue to work justify their lack of solidarity. It also presupposes that art is integral to capitalist relations, and that the recuperation of critical or radical art is an inevitable attribute of this society. But the Art Strike is merely one way of tackling this situation, and can only be effective if it is regarded as a tactic in the struggle against capitalism rather than the end of tactics. By enlisting Baudrillard in the defence of the strike, its protagonists are in danger of confusing these roles.

Baudrillard argues that the history of criticism, including the Dada experience, shows that recuperation is inevitable, and that a belief in the possibility of critical art or any other discourse is naive. This renders criticism pointless, and places the critic in an unjustifiable position. Participation in the networks of power it attacks will always be supportive of them, and silence, apathy, and the refusal to contribute or participate in the debate are the only valid responses to existing society. So Baudrillard says nothing? Far from it. He produces books, articles and academic papers by the dozen, most of which are couched in mystified and complex terminology which makes them inaccessible to all those without the opportunity to study them. The disengagement he proposes is strictly for other people, the masses express their dissent through passivity while the philosophers continue to profit from and, by their own arguments, support the capitalist system of relations they purport to be attacking.

Anyone who does refuse to be creative for the three years of the Art Strike will be less hypocritical than Baudrillard but not necessarily more critical. At the logical extreme of Dada's suicide, Baudrillard's philosophy, or today's Art Strike, is the view that it would have been more damaging to capitalism if nothing had ever been created. Then there would be no ideas or art works to recuperate, and capitalism would have been deprived of a part of its cultural support. But where there is nothing to be recuperated, there is nothing to fight with: the capitalist establishment might be disarmed, but so would its opponents.

If there is one characteristic of capitalism we may be sure of, it is that nothing can escape it. But faced with an impossible situation, the loud and active search for possibilities is an alternative to silent passivity. Nothing can escape the saboteur either, and the legacy left by Dada and others is part of an armoury which can be plundered by the subversives as well as the establishment. The culture of the past must not be destroyed or abandoned, but superseded in its use of 'partisan propaganda purposes'<sup>4</sup> in the present. This can easily be attacked as a form of liberal reformism, changing from within, etc. But we do live within capitalism, and there is no such thing as change from without. The question becomes one of how the change from within must be pursued. The strike is one answer, but it is just as likely that the most effective anti-capitalist artists are those who work as saboteurs. Their awareness of the recuperation of their work does not petrify them, instead, they use this recognition to sidestep and expose the mechanisms, recuperation amongst them, which perpetuate capitalism.

The value of the Art Strike is in its proposal of silence, rather than silence itself, the propaganda rather than the deed. The Art Strike must be seen as a means of exposing, rather than escaping recuperation. Art Strike propaganda reveals the extent of recuperation and proposes an action which cannot be recuperated. But anything which is totally invulnerable to recuperation cannot be used in contestation either. Although the Art Strike propaganda is meaningless without the Art Strike, the strike is also useless without the propaganda. Inaction must first be justified and explained through action, you have to say why you're going to be silent. The art strikers claim that the tactics of industrial struggle are being brought

to art, but the strike is not the only industrial weapon, and artists have always taken their techniques of sabotage and subversion from workers. Disputes vary according to the nature of the work in question: although car workers might well stop making cars, printers might prefer to print their own propaganda rather than stop printing.

The Art Strike is a valid response to the problems of criticism, but it is not the only one. It is a good thing only insofar as it produces more radical art, of which its own propaganda is a perfect example. Consequently it is a good thing only in its failure, and since this is inevitable, the Art Strike is necessarily a good thing. Once put into the world, tactics such as this can be used by anyone for any ends. So long may such active resistance continue! Here's to the saboteurs, the double agents, those who turn the world around! Don't strike, occupy!

— **Sadie Plant**, first published in *Here and Now 10*, Leeds Spring 1990.

1 *Art Strike Handbook*, p. 38.

2 Mustapha Khyati, *Captive Words*. Ken Knabb (ed) *Situationist International Anthology* (Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkely, 1981), p. 171.

3 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Macmillan, London, 1979), p. 18

4 Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, *Methods of Detournement*, *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 9.

## STRIKING AT THE HEART OF ART –

### Extract

At the age of twenty-seven Stewart Home went on strike. Previously active as artist, organiser, writer and publisher, Home had been a provocative presence on the arts scene. Renowned for his disregard for the conventions of the art circuit and with a determination to subvert the dogma of both left and right politics, Home had come to art after a background in punk bands and involvement with groups like Class War.

As a writer and publisher, Home frequently blurred the definitions between pulp fiction and high art theory. In his gallery based work Home similarly undercut the standard practice of culture.

Late in 1989 Home was preparing to go on Art Strike. The idea, imported from America, is that all artists, curators, critics should refuse involvement in cultural production from January 1990 to January 1993. The intention is to 'Dismantle the cultural apparatus.' Home has said he realises he is perhaps the only UK Art Striker. 'I don't expect a huge response,' he states, 'but what's important are the questions something like this poses. Hopefully it is as much about triggering doubts as anything else.'

Home's hard-core disavowal of an art system he sees as corrupt and in support of the state is perhaps the most radical of strategies. Elsewhere, other artists and activists have sought to subvert existing definitions in other ways (...)

— **Nik Houghton**, first published in *Artists Newsletter*, December 1990.

## ARTISTIC DISARMAMENT

*Cluster round the juke box for some songs you've probably heard before,  
it's nothing if it isn't pure.*

— **Yeah Yeah Noh**, *Stealing in the Name of the Lord*.

*The art strike (...) is a good thing only insofar as it produces more  
radical art, of which its own propaganda is a perfect example.*

— **Sadie Plant**, *Here and Now 10*.

The success or failure of Karen Home's 'Art Strike' propaganda can clearly not be judged in terms of how many artists do in fact down tools from now until 1993 — that would be too cruel. However, I cannot accept Plant's alternative evaluation, a political failure is not necessarily an artistic triumph. I would argue, on the contrary, that Home's enterprise is a bad thing all round, reactionary both in what it says (politics) and in how it says it (art). The Art Strike is a good thing only insofar as it is ignored completely<sup>1</sup>: any *success* will be a bad thing. Its importance lies in the weaknesses which its *success* has highlighted. This is most obvious in the area of concepts of art, where the Art Strike has succeeded in popularising a peculiarly banal and ill-thought out version of what art is and what 'good art' is or might be. It is about time we got our own ideas on the subject sorted out. As Mike Peters' article in *Here and Now 10* began to suggest, it is not enough simply to advocate 'more radical art.' We must first identify what art actually is and does; then we can consider how it might be capable of being 'radical.'

My position, briefly, is as follows. Jean-Pierre Voyer wrote, "Whether the subject sinks into madness, practices art or participates in an uprising (...) the two poles of daily life — contact with a narrow and separate reality on the one hand and spectacular contact with the totality on the other — are simultaneously abolished, opening the way for the unity of individual life." (*Reich - how to use*). Well, no he didn't — for 'art' read 'theory' — but the description holds good. Finding the language for real communication, as opposed to both a spectacular understanding of the totality and the meaninglessness of everyday 'life'<sup>2</sup>, going beyond individual isolation and spectacular collectivity into a genuine commonality; this is the process of making theory, but also that of making art. Voyer's emphasis on the subjective experience of making theory, its effects on the theorist's character armour as well as on her view of the world, apply here also. Art, just as much as theory, is a process of 'making common meanings': to the extent that those meanings are 'radical' this will be a taxing activity, for the artist as much as the theorist. Contented artists, as well as contented theorists, should be avoided: they are clearly engaged in reiterating meanings which are already common. Tortured artists, on the other hand, should be sought out and encouraged.

Now, it has for a long time been assumed that art and theory are in fact not comparable, and that anyone involved in the former owes it to the global proletarian struggle to jack it in and concentrate on the latter. (Ironically, much of the suspicion

with which Karen Home is now regarded arose for precisely this reason). Like so much else that affects us today, this goes back to the fifth conference of the SI (Goteborg, 1961). On that occasion Attila Kotanyi stated that situationist art was impossible under 'the dominant conditions of artistic authenticity;' any art produced by situationists would promptly be recuperated. By way of solution, Kotanyi proposed that members of the SI continue to produce art, but that all such work be referred to as 'anti-situationist.' "While various confused artists nostalgic for a positive art call themselves situationist, anti-situationist art will be the mark of the best artists."

Whether this could have been, or was intended as, a serious solution is unclear; its actual effect was the exclusion of several members, the redirection of the SI's activities onto the plane of theory, and the long-standing bias against art which was eventually to enable Karen Home to impress the hell out of a lot of people by dropping names like Gustav Metzger. (OK, OK, I'd never heard of him either). Whether it was justified in its own terms is equally unclear. While one sympathises with Raoul Vaneigem's call for the SI to cease its involvement in 'the spectacle of refusal;' it's hard to share Vaneigem's confidence that the (predictable) alternative — 'the refusal of the spectacle'<sup>3</sup> — can be embarked on by the simple expedient of producing theory to the exclusion of art. Indeed, the situationists could only maintain their own faith in theory as a spectacle-free zone by continually contrasting 'theory' (hoooray) with 'ideology' (boo, hiss!); a distinction which does little to illuminate the actual relations of the production of theory, and which is in any case difficult to make with any consistency. However we describe the process of recuperation (and Kotanyi's statement that situationist art 'will be recuperated by society and used against us,' contains too much paranoia and too little politics to be really useful) we need to be clear that it can be applied to everything. Kotanyi's fear, a school of art called 'situationism,' never came true<sup>4</sup>; but the political ideology of 'situationism' appeared in 1968 and has never gone away.

My contention, then, is that the situationists were mistaken in labelling art as spectacular and theory as authentic. The reason why no art exists which can be guaranteed free of the taint of the spectacle (or of 'bourgeois culture') is that there are no such guarantees, for art or for anything else; there is no 'this side' of the spectacle. Theory is not the situationists' pure negative, nor is art a tool of the commodity economy. Rather, both art and theory are means of communication — languages of common meanings. Both come in new, old, subversive and spectacular varieties; both, if found threatening, will swiftly be recuperated; both can be plagiarised (or detoured, as we pro-situs used to say) — and the plagiarisms themselves may be useful or useless, radical or reactionary.

The more attentive reader will by now have realised that I am not in sympathy with the Art Strike. I can best explain my reasons by referring the reader once again to that historic meeting in Goteborg: more specifically to Karen Home's view of the matter, as given in her *The Assault On Culture: utopian currents from lettrisme to class war*. (Is there any justification for that 'e' on the end of 'lettrisme?' I think we should be told). Home rejects the SI's verdict in favour of theory and against



art, siding with the Scandinavian and German situationists who were excluded following the 'anti-situationist art' proposal and who later formed a second Situationist International. (For the sake of clarity I have adopted the real SI's term of abuse for this group, which I will refer to as the Nashist SI). Home speaks approvingly of these artists, who shared 'a belief in the collective, and non-competitive production of art.' However, we're not actually talking about 'art' here: "Overt and conscious use of collective practices to make 'cultural artifacts' do not really fit the description 'art' — at least if one is using the term to describe the high culture of the ruling class in capitalist societies." Nor, indeed, if one is using the term to describe pig farming. The SI's valuation of theory rested on two oppositions: between theory and art, and between theory and ideology. Having reversed the terms of the first opposition, Home echoes the second with an equally mythical dichotomy: all art is either 'high culture' (boo) or collective cultural artefact production (hoooray!). Like its counterpart, this is not an easy position to maintain empirically.

The significance of all this for the Art Strike is twofold. Firstly, the terms become blurred: should all 'art' cease, or only identifiably 'high culture' forms? Or should art be allowed to continue only if it passes the Home test ('overt and conscious use of collective practices')? This last interpretation might explain why issue 8 of the paper *Anti-Clock-Wise* contains both anti-culture material and an article in praise of Mail Art by Mark Lawson.<sup>5</sup> But material from the Mail Art networks has appeared in galleries before now, which presumably means that too is now an ornament of the ruling class; and in any case Home is currently advocating a complete 'refusal of creativity.' Problems, problems! More importantly, if one rejects the picture of art as a sea of ruling class culture with a few islands of subversive practice dotted about in it, the whole thing collapses. The entire 'struggle against the received culture of the reigning society' which Home has been conducting since 1985<sup>6</sup> is built on the idea that 'received culture' disseminates the values of 'the reigning society,' with art in particular representing 'the high culture of the ruling class in capitalist societies.' This image of culture as a conveyor belt, carrying the values of the ruling class into everyday consciousness, is necessitated only by Home's a priori decision to divide art into sheep and goats. It's certainly not necessitated by the facts. True, art is a material process within society; true, art is never innocent of the existing social order, and is always under pressure to promote it — within the artist's mind as much as anywhere. This, though, only adds up to saying that art — and 'culture' — is a means of communication and therefore a space of contestation, or a battleground as we say in English. The task is not to combat received culture but to go to work on it: embracing parts of it, emphatically rejecting others but above all diverting<sup>7</sup> it to our own purposes.

In fairness, it must be said that there is more to the Art Strike than that. There is also an argument about artists as people, alleging that their status as pseudo-radical high-cultural merchants gives them elitist delusions about 'the superiority of their 'creativity' over the leisure and work pursuits of the social majority.' Without the prop of the anti-'culture' argument, though, this looks less like radicalism and more

like guilt-tripping. Elitism is a disfigurement of the character: it's almost as bad as spots. If artists are worried about it, though, the answer is simple: go away and get it cleaned up. We don't want them moaning to the rest of us about how ugly they are and all the parties they're missing ("I couldn't go out looking like this - what would all those beautiful workers say?"). In any case, elitism is a sign of incipient co-option: and co-option means that your work is being misappropriated. Don't give up — take it back! Just say no!

So much for the overt — political — meanings of the Art Strike. There is, however, more to it than that: there is a sense, as Sadie Plant implied, in which the Art Strike is an art work. This can best be appreciated by looking again at the question of success or failure, our assessment of which depends entirely on how we interpret the Art Strike itself. Taken straight, it's clearly a miserable failure. It is unimaginable that an actual Art Strike will materialise: even the idea has made very little headway outside the pages of *Smile* and none at all outside the anarchist milieu. Talking about 'the Art Strike' at all is doing it a fairly large favour: what exists is a campaign for an Art Strike, or more precisely propaganda in favour of a campaign for an Art Strike. That propaganda has no more popular support than the calls for a General Strike that issue from time to time from the organs of the corpse of Leninism, and as such deserves the same oblivion. Alternatively, we can take the whole thing as a rather deadpan joke at the expense of 'political artists' (if you're so radical let's see you on the picket line), but this doesn't improve matters much: hardly anyone has either got the joke or fallen for it.

These, however, are not the only possibilities. In between lies the whole terrain of irony, of saying one thing and meaning two or three others: the terrain where meanings split and proliferate, where the distinction between 'theory' and 'art' ceases to make sense. This, clearly, is the area where Home's promotion of the Art Strike<sup>8</sup> operates; this, too, is one of the areas where really new meanings get made,<sup>9</sup> and an area where *Here and Now*<sup>10</sup> has squatter's rights. In other words, despite Home's post-situationist attachment to a rigid division between art and theory, the disjuncture between the Art Strike's apparent meaning and its real impact mean that it works, if it works at all, as a combination of art and theory; or rather, as a demonstration of the impossibility of separating the two.

It makes sense, then, to refer to the Art Strike's propaganda as 'radical art,' at least in the sense of 'unprecedented art.' This though, is not the only consideration: not all new meanings are good ones. What, then, is the Art Strike really 'saying?' Two main themes are apparent: a complete abandonment of politics, associated with an impression of a kind of ultimate and unsurpassable radicalism. The first can best be approached by considering the hypothetical political impact of a realised Art Strike. Industrial action works to counteract the isolation and passivity which are endemic in this society: strikes are a collective rejection of the strikers' role as workforce and an affirmation that they're worth more than that. A strike by artists, though, would actually promote passivity and isolation: the strikers would not be a group refusing work but a scattering of individuals doing nothing. To this picture we must add the facts that an art strike will not happen, and that very few people

either know or care about what artists do with their time anyway. A call for inaction, which is bound to be ignored, and which is addressed to people whose actions nobody notices: what is this but an elaborate demonstration of the futility of politics? The Marxists aspired to change the world: the point, it would appear, is to withdraw from it.

This relates closely to the second point. Home has made an easy reputation out of radicals' tendency to confuse the concepts of 'qualitative supersession' and 'reductio ad absurdum': that is, to assume that all previous radical practice can be superseded simply by 'taking it further.' This generally takes fairly sophisticated forms: talking about 'situationist ideology,' for example, or alleging that radical art is part of ruling class culture. Latterly, though, Karen Home has specialised in the most radical-looking strategy of all: negate everything. The tendency of the Art Strike is to argue that, outside itself, there is no authentic opposition: that all oppositional activity, radical art included, is a form of social integration. The empirical difficulties here are obvious and major: it is hard to see how anyone other than Karen Home could ever prove that they were actually 'opposing' existing society, and not merely indulging in 'oppositionalism' — except perhaps by supporting the Art Strike, reading Richard Allen and slagging off the SI... The strategy which Home has 'taken further' here is the division between the SI and all other 'theorists,' between the artists of the Nashist SI and all other 'artists,' and for that matter between the Seventh Day Adventists and all other 'Christians.' What is even more important is the end result. So complete a negation results in a politics not of negation but of abstention: if nothing is authentic 'nothing can be done.'

This is the true message of the Art Strike. Ultimately Home, like Baudrillard, is advocating silence and inaction,<sup>11</sup> is promoting as the ultimate negation, alienation from one's own capacity to act. This has its own interest for theory-collectors and the terminally disillusioned;<sup>12</sup> its main interest for the rest of us is that it marks Home out as a practitioner of theory for theory's sake, political activity taken up in the belief that it is pointless. To describe this as radical would do violence to the meaning of the word: the word 'reactionary' fits much better. 'Boring' does quite nicely too.<sup>13</sup> As with the theory of Baudrillard, as with the 'art for art's sake' espoused by aesthetes from Walter Peter to the Neoists,<sup>14</sup> the Art Strike's only real achievement will be the entertainment it gives its audience — and, of course, the careers it makes.

— **Mr Jones**, first published in *Here & Now* 11, Glasgow Summer 1991.

1 Damn!

2 'Life's about as wonderful as a cold' - Mark Perry, 1977. Perry is not known to have been familiar with the situationists' theses on the banalisation of everyday life, but being a 'punk' he was doubtless influenced by them anyway.

3 Cf. the following comment on the Unification Church mass wedding of a few years back: "A spectacle of pairs, assuredly. Let us not forget, however, that this was also 'a pair of spectacles.'" Taken from Alec Douglas H.'s *The End of Finality* (Improbable Books, 1989). The situationists, we must conclude, never got much beyond the reversal of terms. It will be for others to create the 'terms of reversal.'

- 4 Partial disproof: "Before Pop and after Abstract Expressionism there was a still-born movement, based in continental Europe... Called 'Situationism,' this movement expressed a rebellious need to counterpose the creative and irreverent with the anticipated (sic) homogeneity of media society. Essentially a non-starter as art per se the movement had, nonetheless, an influence on French cinema and architecture" - Philip Core reviewing an exhibition at the ICA in *New Statesman and Society*, 30th June 1989. Of course, the curators invited this kind of misinterpretation by staging the exhibition in an art gallery, rather than simply getting out and creating situations.
- 5 Sorry 'Pawson.' Apologies all round!
- 6 Not single-handedly, of course! Home's struggles have been shared with the PRAXIS group, a guy called Tony from Cork and numerous magazines around the world all called *Smile*. In addition many interesting uses have been made of that famous general-purpose pseudonym or 'multiple identity,' 'George Eliot.'
- 7 Or 'detouring' it. Next week: 'deriving' for beginners.
- 8 My knowledge of the originators of the Art Strike - the PRAXIS group - is woefully inadequate: however, I suspect that they actually took the Art Strike seriously (but that's Americans for you). Only on its arrival in England was it transformed by Karen Home's creative genius into the polyvalent multi-media event that we now know so well.
- 9 Burroughs half-realised this when he asserted that cut-ups foretold the future: simply rearrange some words to make an unknown phrase or saying and 'the future leaks through.' Certainly, new meanings could be created by this method: it's a kind of automatic writing. I don't know, though—call me old-fashioned, but I prefer meanings which have been consciously made to the kind that leak out of the end of a random process. You can't beat a good work of art, that's what I say.
- 10 A magazine of radical types.
- 11 Articles in *Smile* have advocated 'sensuous inactivity' for the duration of the Art Strike. Idle buggers.
- 12 At the ICA exhibition, a couple of copies of *Smile* were shown, exhibited under glass so that we could appreciate the witty and amusing cover art. Those responsible are believed to fall into both categories.
- 13 Though, to be fair, this is a difficulty encountered from time to time by the greatest of theorists. "If the element of boredom I have experienced in writing this finds an echo in the reader, whate else is this but one more proof of our failure to live?" as Raoul Vaneigem asked in his forward to *The Kids Book of How to Do It, or The Revolution of Everyday Life* as it's sometimes known. How true that is, how very true. And what a cop-out.
- 14 Home once described a reference to 'situationist ideology' as a 'calculated insult.' To judge from Home's account of their activities, describing the Neoists as artists is more in the nature of a calculated compliment.

## ON THE ART STRIKE

Art abstracts from life. Abstraction is deletion. When the first artist painted an aurochs on a cave wall, the first critic saw it and said, "That's an aurochs!" But it wasn't an aurochs, it was a painting. It's been downhill for art criticism ever since. Art, like science, is illumination through elimination. Artists remove in order to improve. In this sense, minimalism is not just another school of art, but its evolving essence, and all of modern art can be seen as a process of progressive self-destruction. Artists often destroy themselves, occasionally each other, but it was left to a relatively unknown German artist, Gustav Metzger, to give this artistic

impulse its most succinct articulation when in 1959 he announced his theory of 'auto-destructive art.' It's not surprising, then, that Metzger also anticipated the proposed Art Strike 1990-93.

On January 1, 1990 — if they comply with the directives of the PRAXIS Group — all artists will put down their tools for three years. There will be no openings, no showings, no readings. 'Cultural workers,' unless they scab, will also walk out. Galleries, museums and 'alternative spaces' will shut down or be converted to serve more practical purposes. According to the Art Strike leadership, everybody benefits. The artists, by stepping out from under their burden of specialised creativity, get not only a breather but a chance to get a life. And the plebian masses, no longer cowed by 'talented bullies,' are in turn expected to rush into art like fresh air into a vacuum.

Although appearing at first as the suppression of art, the Art Strike is in essence its realisation — the ultimate work of art, the culmination of its telos. In the Art Strike, artistic abnegation achieves its final expression: art, having become nothing becomes everything. If art is what artists don't do, what isn't art now? The Art Strike thus becomes an exercise in imperialism. After all, everyone else has been on an Art Strike all along. With the Art Strike, the leaders are given a chance to catch up with their followers, who weren't previously aware they had leaders, let alone needed any.

Ostentatious renunciation is greed in its most warped and insidious form. By their noisy refusal of art, the Art Strikers affirm its importance and thus their own, not unlike alcoholics whose AA meetings testify to the power of the drug and thus to their own power in collectively renouncing it. But there the analogy ends. The Art Strikers liken their strike to the syndicalist General Strike so as to appropriate the glamour of this obsolete tactic. But a Particular Strike is not a General Strike; and the Art Strike, since it doesn't include the refusal of work by waged or salaried workers (artists generally being self-employed freelancers or independent contractors), is not a strike at all.

What remains after artists forswear art? Artists, of course. The Art Strike magnifies the importance of artists even as it eliminates their toil. Disencumbered of the obligation to create, the artist no longer must try to inform or agitate or even entertain. All pretence to be useful to other people can be dropped. But that's not to say artists are about to disappear into the crowd — if they did, nobody would ever notice there even was an Art Strike. No, artists must instead make a production out of their refusal to produce, they must clamour for attention over what they don't do, even though their credentials for inactivity are precisely their previous art. This is what makes the refusal of art elitist. The Art Strike is a vanguardist notion: only artists can refuse art, and only artists can flatter themselves that they stand in the way of an outburst of popular creativity.

Actually, the reason the hoi-poloi don't create art is not because they're intimidated by 'talented bullies,' but because their creative power has been so suppressed — above all by work — that they devote their leisure hours to consumption, not creation. School, work, the family, religion, rightism and leftism — these

thwart creativity. The sort of 'art' created by the Art Strike leadership, its various predictions and pronouncements, is much more opaque to the proles than the representational art of pre-modern times, and no less so that modern art, which is too remote from everyday experience for anybody to be bullied by it, unless by its reputation, which of course, will grow during the Years Without Art.

Art Strike theorists are ambiguous about the scope of the strike. If it represents the refusal of 'creativity' by specialists, it is only for artists. But if the Art Strike seeks to close down museums, libraries and galleries, it must include the workers for whom it would then be a real strike, the employees of the cultural apparatus unable to refuse their creativity since nobody has ever called for it in the first place. The janitor would as soon mop up the museum as a nuclear powerplant, especially since the intellectuals will hound him out of there too if they can. Such workers already know firsthand what artists require outlandish antics to comprehend — working for the cultural industry is still working. Only for the artist is the Art Strike a work of art. Others who get involved would be but the paint the striking artists apply to the canvas, props in a performance-art piece. Human lives and livelihoods as the stuff of art. What artist in his or her deepest inwardness hasn't longed to echo Nero's cry, What an artist dies in me!

Since the Years Without Income hold no appeal for the art industry proletariat or its bureaucracy, they will no doubt remain on the job. The impact of the strike will be very uneven. Curators and librarians will be glad to be rid of the hardest part of their task — keeping abreast of new artworks and conjecturing which ones will pass the test of time. Art has been piling up since before the Bronze Age, three years will not be time enough to reassess and rearrange and redistribute the existing inventory. Still, budget pressures may ease. Music, already all but given over to 'classic hits,' will be living in the past too. In lieu of live music, disco will come back — it pretty much already has. Most people watch TV, not stage plays now; now everybody will. Are the artists going on strike so that, after three years, we beg them to come back? If theirs was a place of privilege before, how high then will their seat be in 1993? The real inspiration for the Art Strike is not, as is pretended, the General Strike of the proletariat, but rather something already depicted in a work of art — the General Strike of capitalism in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

But artists won't have to wait three years to profit from the Art Strike. Returns will be immediate and they will increase like compound interest. The Art Strike cunningly acts upon supply, not demand. Existing art will appreciate in value since there won't be anything coming into the market to compete with it. In addition, there's the surcharge conferred by the mystique of extinction; subsequently, recent art will lead the price rise as the last of its kind. In fact, it will stand not as the last but as the culmination, since the ideology of progress so sways the Western mind that it regularly mistakes the latest of anything for the final form of a supposed evolutionary process. The last shall be made first, or at least it'll be priced that way. No wonder some of the less commercially successful contemporary artists are leading the Art Strike, and no wonder others follow them. They don't propose to destroy artworks (although, if done selectively, that would have nearly the same

effect as the Art Strike). The Years Without Art will include nothing of the kind, even if everybody joins the strike. Instead, the Art Strike will create a cartel — its inspiration isn't the IWW or the CNT, but rather OPEC.

The Art Strike is not, for all its proletarian posturing, in any way indebted to the workers movement, except in the theft of what you'd expect artists to steal — its imagery. It enables artists to invest their exhaustion with importance. The refusal of art only certifies artists as the expert interpreters of what nobody but artists do. The art of refusal, on the other hand, acts against what everybody does but nobody once did, against work and submission to the state. The art of refusal is the art of living, which begins with the general strike which never ends.

— **Bob Black**, first published in *Artpaper*, Vol 9, No. 4, December 1989, Minneapolis, MN, USA.

## **TEXTS GENERATED BY AN ART STRIKE ACTION IN ALBANY**

### **LETTER FROM NEAL KEATING TO GOVERNOR MARIO CUOMO**

Dear Governor Cuomo,

Recently we have issued public commendations to both you and Commissioner Egan of OGS (Office of General Services) for your apparent participation in the noble, and global, Art Strike.

Obviously, you are more well-read than I had previously given you credit for. As things stand, precious few people seem to have any idea of what this Art Strike is all about. I am curious as to how you first became acquainted with the ideas and theories that have since come to represent the Art Strike in all its criticAL (albeit unknown) glory.

Do you intend to issue a public statement of alliance with the Art Strike? Would such a statement include a thorough denunciation of the elitist manipulation of humanity's creative energies — as practiced by the cultural arbitrageurs known as "artists"?

As part of observing the Art Strike will you postpone the return of Art in the ESP (Empire State Plaza) concourse until January 1, 1993? If not, can you tell me why?

Sincerely,

— **Neal Keating**, for the AASAC (Albany Art Strike Action Committee).

### **NEWSFRONT: OFF THE WALL**

Part curmudgeonly pranksters, part dead earnest activists against the intrusion of right-wing values on the art scene, those participating in the nine-month old Art Strike have had a hard time "enforcing" their call for a three year moratorium on art.

But earlier this month, the Albany Art Strike Action Committee garnered the support of the state Office of General Services (OGS) and Gov. M. Cuomo, however unknowingly this support may have been given.

When OGS removed and covered up the art collection in the Empire State Plaza (ESP) concourse, Art Strike moved in, postering the plaza and surrounding communities with a handbill declaring:

“All of the art that lined the walls of the ESP underground concourse has been removed or covered up (and hopefully soon to be destroyed) to call into question the blank emptiness of history that was previously hidden by so many bright colours and squiggly lines.”

Actually, the art was removed to install a new security system, and OGS was not amused by the posters. Tom Tubbs, an OGS spokesman said he was “awestruck” upon receiving a copy of the poster. He dubbed the poster a “terrorist note... an absurdity, filled with typographical errors and irrational charges.”

Tubbs wouldn't go into the specifics of the new-and-improved security system, but did say that it would involve “all kinds of camera surveillance, and several other devices.” He also said that he had never even heard of the Art Strike, nor did Dennis Anderson, curator of the plaza art collection.

All in good fun, said Neal Keating, one of three local Art Strike dis-organisers. “The intent was to suggest something so wild that, even for one moment, it would shatter the silent drone of constant alienation that permeates every aspect of life today,” he said in a prepared statement.

Keating, a writer who has recently relocated to Albany from Woodstock, said that “even people in high places, whether conscious of it or not, are supporting the Art Strike.” Keating challenged Cuomo to “go one step further, and never put the art back up.”

— **Tom Gogola**, *METROLAND*, Albany, New York State 20-26 Sept. 1990.

## **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

### **RE: ESP CONCOURSE ACTION OF OCTOBER 1990**

- 1 We are a group of sensual creatures who occasionally embark on acts of poetic terrorism for the purpose of liberating the wondrous and propagating the extraordinary. We encourage fully conscious orgiastic participation in life.
- 2 In particular, the ESP Concourse action was directly targeted at the walls of boredom both in and out of people's minds as they zombie their way through the monotonous underground cavern. The intent was to suggest something so wild that, even for one moment, it would shatter the silent drone of constant alienation that permeates every aspect of life today, and perhaps drive the beholder to seek out some more intense mode of existence.
- 3 The Empire State Plaza, like the Pyramids of Egypt, is the mausoleum of a ruling class with a taste for death. Part shopping mall, part warren for state workers, the Plaza is the marriage of commerce and power and naturally shows us baby pictures of their offspring: Art — Art which returns to us for a look,



(don't touch), the creative power we have only to reach out and wrest away in order to remake life as an adventure in fellowship, pleasure and play. By flaunting art, especially this collection of Art by the plutocrat Rockefeller's cocktail party cronies, the ESP mocks and insults everyone whose life is eviscerated by obedience and work. The Empire State Plaza, with its outdated modern architecture, already looks as if it were built to be excavated, truly, as the Parisian revolutionaries said in 1968, "soon to be picturesque ruins" — and the sooner the better.

- 4 That a successful Governor and probable presidential candidate would ever attempt to address the overwhelming horror — the ghastly totality of civilisation, in any kind of honest and critical appraisal is, for the most part, beyond the scope of normal speculation. To put forth in a public manner such a suggestion is almost like declaring the existence of a parallel universe, only in much more human terms.

Thus we have acted. For the Art Strike.

— **Neal Keating, Bob Black, Pir Fez Hafez Ad-Dajjil**

## **LETTER TO THE EDITOR, METROLAND**

To the Editor,

There is no cause to speak, as Tom Gogola does, of the Albany Art Strike Action Committee "enforcing" the Art Strike. In a city boasting a combination art gallery and real estate office, the mask has already slipped. Even before our Empire State Plaza action, voluntary compliance with the strike was almost universal. Our ideas are in everyone's heads.

Nor do we care to protect art against intruding "right-wing values." Right-wing, left-wing or art-for-art's-sake, all art is a source of social separation and serves a control function. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.

If (unhappy day) the art returns to the plaza, swept by cameras and laced with censors, the class war will have returned on the electronic battlefield. The curator will be dismissed — he doesn't know his stuff anyway if he hasn't heard of the Art Strike — and replaced by an electronics technician with a military background from the upper ranks of the Capital Police who have already paid us a visit. Henceforth we will visit museums to be looked at by the art.

Our challenge to Gov. Cuomo stands. Get rid of the art. Without such fantasies and distractions, the concourse architecture will quickly become unbearable. The empty walls will be so irritating as to require their immediate removal as well. After the art is gone, after the walls themselves have been removed, comes the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality. This is our entire programme, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future: passageways. The permanence of art or anything else does not enter into our considerations, which are serious.

— **Bob Black, Neal Keating (AASAC)**

—**Tom Gogola replies:** I don't know how Keating and Black can claim that "voluntary compliance with the Strike was almost universal," when Keating himself told me in an interview that "the Art Strike has pretty much been a failure." When I said "enforcing" it was meant as irony, to illuminate the failure of Art Strike to achieve its aim of an artless world.  
*METROLAND*, 4–10 October 1990.

## JUST SAY NO

In a display of anachronistic cultural militance, artists and activists in London, Baltimore and San Francisco are planning an 'Art Strike' to last three years beginning January 1, 1990. "We call on all cultural workers to put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit, or discuss their work from January 1st 1990 to January 1st 1993," begins a 40-page Art Strike Handbook, published last spring.

"We call for all galleries, museums, agencies, 'alternative' spaces, periodicals, theatres, art schools &c., to cease all operations during the same period." While it's unlikely that the luxury market called art will collapse from lack of product early next year, the importance of the Art Strike lies in the nobility of its gesture – a calmly strategic 'no' that Herbert Marcuse called 'the great refusal.'

Though the strikers claim to have fellow travellers as far dispersed as Uruguay and Ireland, none to date have stepped forward in New York. Here in the capital and Babylon of artistic ambition, artists won't sabotage their future by abstaining from the race toward the big time.

Stewart Home, a member of the London committee says that on January 1, "I will stop doing things publicly that will make people think of me as a creative person." Home has published a novel and a book of essays, plays in a punk band called King Mob, organises conferences, and teaches occasionally at London Polytechnic – all of which activities he will cease. For three years, he plans to sell his labour 'in ways that no one would normally interpret as my individual creative act,' for example as a clerk or in construction work.

The art strikers believe that art is not the residue of some enchanted crusade, but merely another product of human labour, like meals or computer chips. Their flat mercantilism places the refusenik activists oddly in sync with current standards, by which all aesthetic objects are commodities, plain and simple. By their (in)action, the strikers seek to force the recognition of artists as labourers who can, if they choose, shut down the production line that serves the senses.

'The Art Strike has a Zen quality of tearing down a logic, but leaving nothing in its place,' says John Berndt of the Baltimore Art Strike Action Committee of 100, which has a handful of members. Berndt has helped stage Art Strike pickets at the Maryland Institute of Art, and Baltimore art openings, and has disseminated 10,000 strike flyers. In January, he plans to stop his work as an experimental musician and performance artist. 'I believe in helping institutions to self-destruct

and trying to get as much information out of that process as possible.'

'Any way that I can sabotage commodity culture attracts me,' says an art striker in San Francisco who, in the venerable spirit of the anonymous collective, declined to be identified. According to another striker, when top-selling New York minimalist Carl Andre apparently heard word of their actions he wrote the Bay Area group to denounce them as 'reactionaries.' The 10-member San Francisco committee is planning a New Year's Eve action at Artists' Television Access Gallery to inaugurate the strike.

Recently, the editors of Photostatic, a marginal art magazine in Iowa City, stated their intention to stop publication in January as an Art Strike action. Stewart Home recently spoke about the work stoppage at the prestigious Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, an appearance that might be likened to an atheist lecturing a convent. 'It's not important to have hundreds of people stop work,' he says, 'but to disturb and demoralise those who endorse the system of artistic production and distribution.'

No well-known artists have aligned themselves with the strike, and cultural work will go forward largely unperturbed, but to look for names is certainly to miss the point. New York is full of artists who are also waiters. By cancelling their personae as creative individuals, those who strike are choosing a real and immeasurable sacrifice. The art strikers seem to have studied the old modernist history of *epater les bourgeois*, espoused by such ace propagandists as Richard Huelsenbeck. In 1920, the German Dadaist wrote, 'The bourgeois must be deprived of the opportunity to buy up art for his justification.' But it remains to be seen whether the Art Strike is truly a work stoppage or merely another piece of performance—more art, or less.

— **Edward Ball**, first published in the *Village Voice*, New York 14/11/89.

## **ADDING MORE FUEL TO THE ART STRIKE FIRE**

"To speak of the Art Strike means to speak of the unknown, to speak of a door to a new world, to speak of a desire to discover what one does not know. For how can one know a desire without satisfying it?"

ATA Gallery hosted the Art Strike Mobilisation Week January 3-8 with a variety of events: discussion, performances, propaganda-making, dialogue, testimonial, poetry, direct action, etc. Art Strike, as a polemic, proposes artists give up making art for three years, (1990-1993, *The Years Without Art*), is an effort to free the artist and the artists' product from the chain of commodity in which it is currently entrenched, challenging the hegemony of an elite art market and freeing the artists' time up for other, more important activities, like saving the world. It proposes that such action, or non-action, will help artists get to the 'real' issues (of which art is

not one), such as starving children, flooded villages, earthquake victims. T. Marvin Lowes, initial proponent of Art Strike and ardent polemicist, says:

“...Art has provided us with fantasy worlds, escapes from reality... Art is the glamorous escape, the transformation that shields us from the world... Art has replaced religion as the opiate of the people... But art has sold out to chase its own tail. A self-perpetuating elite market art as a commodity for the wealthy who have everything while making artists themselves rich... Art is money... Artists are murderers! Without art, life would be unendurable! We would have to transform this world... but we do not seize power because we are enchanted by art. Forbid art and revolution will follow — the withholding of creative action is man’s (sic) only remaining weapon...”

Which is all very nice. But what went on at ATA this past week could more honestly be called a dialogue about aesthetics, or a week-long performance piece, than a direct political action. Then again, that’s part of the question the strike ultimately raises: what’s the difference? And what is Art Strike? That was the question asked from Monday to Sunday at ATA, generating not one, but many answers. The following is not simply a review, wanting to avoid the slings and arrows of sincere artists tracking toward the truth about Art Strike — though I’ll tell you right off, I’m getting paid by the inch here, enough to make me feel legitimised in my own pursuit of an identity, and little enough to hide from Uncle Sam. It is interpretation, collage, all views are not represented; I take a poetic license whenever I can, I say “Art Strike is” a lot because Art Strike is something unto itself, separate from and part of the individual activities that transpired, as well as the collective gathering of what was said/done over the course of the week. It exists in both the past and present tense. Art Strike is a dialogue, a layering, a piling on of words and action. It is what it is: changing, vital, alive.

Art Strike is an aesthetic dialogue aiming to blur further the distinctions between Art and Life. Art Strike is not a cocktail party. Art Strike advocates a performance approach to life, going to a gallery not to see art, but going to a gallery to be art. Art Strike is a provocative declaration of aesthetic values and a condemnation of mainstream ‘high’ art, the potential of the artist to sell out for big bucks, the cheapening of art through commodification. Art Strike is a political statement about a) the art world, b) capitalism, c) commodity culture, d) our inability to care for one another as human beings. Art Strike is the final leap of the visual artist out of the frame. Art Strike is an excuse for polemical outbursts. A lot of people get belligerent about Art Strike and what it advocates. Art Strike is still unsure of its terminology. Art Strike is a community effort. Art Strike is a good joke. Art Strike is a really bad idea. Art Strike was a good excuse for a good party.

Art Strike wishes people thought of art the way they think of potatoes. Art Strike takes an anti-art stance denoting art just as atheism denotes God (Duchamp). Art Strike is, quite simply, an artistic statement. It is a call for greater creativity in all aspects of one’s life. “The whole point is that life during the strike is going to be more creative not less.” Art Strike is primarily about artists. The focus of Art Strike on stopping production takes the attention off the artist, which is where it belongs.

Art Strike supports the development of the artist into a whole person. Art Strike recognises the primacy of the artist's desire to create and communicate meaningful truths. None of the artists at ATA really wanted to give up making art for three years. Some people thought a good replacement for making art during the strike would be a band. Art Strike is useful for stretching the mind, but not necessarily as a habit of action. Art Strike could be for artists what AA is for alcoholics. Art Strike takes the lid off all that's false.

Art Strike was perhaps the most lively event ever staged at ATA Gallery. Art Strike was a supportive environment for performance. Art Strike provoked a dialogue and performance deserving of note in some critical journal, by some critical critic, somewhere. Art Strike remains unattached to product. Art Strike exists because it's less taxing to make personas than it is to make art. Yet Art Strike forbids public personas during The Years Without Art. Art Strike is not about style, and specifically, it is not about being cool. Art Strike is going to fail. Art Strike condemns the easy way out. No one necessarily agrees about what Art Strike is.

Art Strike aims to liberate artists and non-artists from the rigidity of labels and postures limiting our creativity and attentiveness. As such, Art Strike is a communist plot. Art Strike is a self-righteous redetermination by people who produce art of little merit and are resentful about it. Art Strike invests the art object with a peculiar lucidity and cultural mobility that it may or may not possess. The polemic of Art Strike makes some unfathomable leaps: Give up art = Save the starving. Art Strike advocates a deeper relationship to art while at the same time condemning the label 'artist.' There were more boys than girls at Art Strike. Art Strike is about the possibilities of union inherent in our meeting. Art Strike is about personal spectacle. Art Strike is a good place to be seen wearing blue and white polka-dotted suits. Art Strike did not address the issue of beauty.

Art Strike is not about God, but it could be. Art Strike advocates the negation of art as the last frontier. Art Strike purports to be new, radical, a frontier, but anti-art's been on the books since the turn of the century. Art Strike has no qualms about plagiarism. Art Strike exists in the Twilight of the Raw, in the belief that there is nothing new to be done in art except to relinquish it. Art Strike is about the intimacy of not knowing. Art Strike is a perpetual challenge. Art Strike never authoritatively defined Art, Strike, Aesthetics, or really any other word of import. Art Strike created a forum to talk about all these important words, though. Art Strike was neither subtle nor metaphoric. Art Strike is a critical act and critical inquiry. Art Strike is an intellectual discourse without intellectual rigour. Art Strike is an intellectual discussion obfuscating any commitment to the life of the mind. Art Strike is somewhat self-important. Anti-intellectualism is big at Art Strike. Art Strike is unformed in its lexical considerations. It is not always possible to tell whether or not Art Strike is taking itself at all seriously. Art Strike has a good sense of humour.

Art Strike never even heard of cellular consciousness. Art Strike is committed to a regenerative process of change. Art Strike cries out for the beauty of the person, not the beauty of the art object. Art Strike made it easier for me to go into the studio

this morning without worrying if I would have anything to show for it when I left. Art Strike believes in the ultimate power of the artist as an active force in her (sic) environment. Art Strike is primarily about life-style choices. Art Strike is not a replacement for Catholicism. Art Strike is about making New Year's resolutions not to talk to people about your work. Art Strike is the pursuit of polyester and paisley. Art Strike was not about the spirituality inherent in the process of making Art. But it could be.

Art Strike is about how much we love our identities as artists and how much we love contradicting ourselves at the same time. Art Strike comes about because art is contradictory. Art Strike is all about communication and change. Changing is such good art-making. This idea is to be applied in infinite permutations to just about everything. But it is not so much a matter of realising the Art Strike, or even of building on every level of life everything that could only be an Art Strike memory, or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. The Art Strike can only be realised by being suppressed.

— Rachel Kaplan, first published in *Coming Up!*, San Francisco, Feb. 1989.

## EXTRACTS FROM YAWN

### LETTERS FROM YAWN'S READERS

Dear Yawn

... here's some info pertaining to the Boston Institute of Contemporary Arts' panel discussion of the Situationist International... (I) challenged Greil Marcus (art critic NYC Village Voice) and read the Art Strike flyer. He interrupted, 'I don't believe artists are murderers...' Oddly, no applause. He continued, 'The Neoists and Stewart Home are only using the Art Strike to call attention to themselves.' He concluded, 'Art Strike will fail!' I countered, 'Of course it will fail, but you've lost the entire point of why Art Strike must happen.'

— Lebanon, New Hampshire.

... I've been thinking about this Art Strike thang after reading a pamphlet about it, and this is how I see it. I'm not going to go along w/ any Art Strike because what's in it for me. Little ol' me is supposed to stop doing my measly art books with no thanks from anyone while the people who put out 'Art Strike' pamphlets and manifestos are going to go right on doing it, keeping right on going with their conceptual art project! Forget it!

— San Francisco, California.

### ART STRIKE AS ART

It's amusing to think that 'Art Strikers' could so value their work that they imagine its cessation would change the economic topography of our country. If they actually saw Art Strike as a practical solution to the problem of the artist's

contribution to the perpetuation of an oppressive system, they would be guilty of the egotism and elitism they deplore. They would be elevated to the status of tragic heroes, like the lost Olympians, who sacrificed personal glory to the dream of a greater good.

The participants have no delusions about their (non)action and yet, in the imagination the ramifications of Art Strike are exhilarating. If cultural workers suddenly shut up and could no longer view themselves as superior beings, humanity would truly have the chance to create itself anew. What would this new humanity rising like a Phoenix from the ashes of its own culture be like?

Art Strike is a brilliant gesture. Art Strike is symbolic, merely provocative. It is meant to provoke conversation among artists, like all the other insulated works it rails against. It is a piece of performance art that will break down the boundaries between art and non-art to focus on life.

Since Art Strike is art, during Art Strike, Art Strike itself won't be possible. Conceptual art in the wake of Art Strike would be redundant and superficial. No single work of art could approach the brilliant simplicity/complexity of Art Strike. I imagine artists spilling out of the ship of culture like so many bewildered rats, only to drown.

Since art will be irrelevant after the strike, the strike will have accomplished its mission, even though by definition this is impossible. Art Strike is the sound of one hand clapping. Therefore it is the most important art of this century — make that this millenium.

— Karen Elliot

## **REACTION TO THE ART STRIKE**

Jean-Rene Lassalle, student, Berlin, 24/12/89: 'This Art Strike is hysterical really... One might say that it's like the graffiti of May '68; sentences... which were made up to provoke (thought among other things) while perhaps their immediate significance is not so very important. The mystique of the Artist bothers me some. On the other hand, if one creates, he gives of himself... and this is worthy of some recognition.' (Translated from the French).

Jacques Abeille, novelist, Bordeaux 31/12/89: 'What a silly idea, this Art Strike... it's a logical paradox; that is to say, a statement which involves a contradiction, a proposition which negates itself. To choose to do this strike assumes in the first place that you are what you pretend to end: one must first be an artist in order to quit being one. It follows from this that all who during these three years present themselves as non-artists will be artists, and that all those who present themselves as artists won't be.

By this formal logic one will allege that its proposals are universals that do not pertain: the Art Strike doesn't apply to everyone, but only to those who are already manifested as artists.. One should not say 'all who...', but instead only 'those who...', or 'certain...' So the proposal of an Art Strike doesn't entail the advancement of a universal proposition, therefore it holds to the official and mercantile distinctions between artists and the rest of the human population. In

other words, to subvert this distinction, you accept the basis of what you're trying to subvert, and end up prolonging it by adding on a new criterion: from now on the artists will be the ones participating in the Art Strike during these three years.

## **STATEMENT REGARDING THE ART STRIKE 1990-1993**

Now that I have learned the reasons for the international Art Strike 1990-1993, I declare that I will support it, but in Yugoslavia, the country where I am living and making art, an Art Strike would have no sense because:

- 1 There is no art market here yet.
- 2 Prices of art works are so low that you don't sell at all. You make art for pleasure, philosophical and creative reasons.
- 3 We have only a few art critics and curators, and they have no power or influence upon artists.
- 4 You don't have to pay the galleries for having your own exhibition, but galleries pay you for that. Shows are not commercial at all, so alternative artists can exhibit in official gallery spaces.
- 5 The serious culture hardly exists here, it is repressed by the primitive, peasant culture, so our aim is to develop and support culture here.

So I am suggesting all art strikers to come and settle in Yugoslavia during the period 1990-1993 and continue making art and exhibitions.

— **Andrej Tisma**, Novi Sad, 11 December 1989.

## **A PERSONAL STATEMENT BY PHILIPPE BILLE**

I would like to criticise several points in this Art Strike (1990-1993) project. First, I disagree with some of the opinions formulated in its promoters' texts. For example, I do not believe that various forms of mischievousness, such as greed, might be suppressed with the hypothetical abolition of the 'capitalist system' of production; nor that the 'unendurable' aspects of the human condition, that art helps us to bear, depend on our economic organisation; nor that it is unjust to designate with a particular word 'artist,' those who manifest certain particular talents; nor that it is deplorable that 'creativity' is unequally spread among the people. Moreover, it is impossible for me to consider, in the private sphere of my 'artistic creation' activity, any idea of prohibition (just as I reject the idea of any obligation to create, such as often appears in the activity of the professional artists and of the apprentices who aim at becoming so).

Nevertheless, there is without doubt much to deplore, and so to criticise, in the present state of arts, culture and civilisation: at least enough, I think, to make it possible to consider this unrealistic idea of the Art Strike (1990-1993) as opportune, even if only as a curse, or an invitation to reflection. Because the point is, first of all, to ascertain and to assert the notable distance which separates us pretty distinctly from the 'art world.' So, with the same meaning with which I declared last June, on my 33rd birthday, that I wanted to 'retire' as an artist, I agree to follow this (in)action movement by refusing in advance, for this period, any new exhibition project, by limiting my publications to the minimum; by associating to



it my collection, lately begun of unopened mail, which gathers postal objects coming from the official, associational or commercial institutions, along with various letters of shabby canvassing; by studying the evolution of the debates raised in the American, free and anonymous newsletter YAWN. It will be alleged against me that this is too easy. This is partially true. So what?

— Translated by **Ph. Bille**, reprinted from *Lettre Documentaire*, Bordeaux, December 1989.

## **LET'S GO BOWLING WITH ART STRIKE!**

Perhaps years of neglect can produce dictatorial desires in even the most stalwart of the usually egalitarian underground. Somebody out there (in here) came up with the idea that for the next three years (1990-1993) artists refrain from producing art. The idea, known as Art Strike, has been discussed in a surprising number of journals, considering its impossibility, authoritarian high-handedness and ultimate disposability as ideas go. In fact it was one notion that should have been disposed of, but wasn't. And so we will be doing without the work of a vowed strikers for three years.

The issue touches me in a sensitive spot and deserves to be exhumed, because it goes well beyond just 'fun and games' in the artistic underground. If Art Strike be not a whispered vicious trick of some swift-tongued disembodied enemy of creativity, let us assume it has developed out of the sense of despair and powerlessness which grips those of us in the midst of creative working in a world of recycled artistic idolatry.

Art Strike is a negative power feeding on the despair experienced from time to time by those who have chosen not to join the ready-made bandwagon of success in a very unsane surface world. This despair is a burden which is, as we speak, slowing down the progress of a thing which could become far more real and far more strong. To adopt a pose of cynicism or nihilism is an understandable response to the great beast of mass-produced culture, but it is an uneducated and unproductive response.

I certainly congratulate the perpetrator of this idea virus called Art Strike. As a meme it has gone very far. It has changed peoples' plans; stopped their progress dead in its tracks: it demonstrates the power a well placed idea can have, even coming from the 'powerless' underground. Some would say that that is precisely the point of Art Strike. If so, let's start planting seeds of artistic fecundity instead of spraying herbicides or exponentially increasing barrenness. The harnessing of this power of ideas (verbal and non-verbal) is, ultimately, the greatest responsibility an artist will ever have.

There is an alchemy where art and daily life meet, are one, are sweet, effortless and closer to the existential bone than thirteen billion printed words on Art Strike (or, for that matter, thirteen billion scatological album titles, misanthropic song lyrics, or other by-products of despair). There is a realisation, which can be cultivated, wherein one can calculate the effect of Good one's creation will have upon the planet. Perhaps these intangibles present a vast and uncharted challenge,

but their reward is sweeter than upsetting a corporate board meeting with free jazz. There is a realm where one is shown the truth (transitional or penultimate though it may be) in statements like, 'God is a foot, Magic is alive' (and art is footwork — proper placement of one's 'dogs' and a minimum of howling at the moon — footwork and fortuitous event). Divorce the shamanistic function of the artist and you get artifice: the glamour we know all too well which dominates the media (Garfield vs. Zippy). We need good art. Better, far better than we're getting. And you Art Strikers are urging voluntary lobotomy for three years? My bardic muse writes, 'Methinks you have been quelled by mutant forms who, from the spirit world, cast a pointless dare your way in order to destabilise a Goodness.'

With these words behind me, let me resume my usual cheery countenance and wish well to all participants or even semi-participants in the great Art Strike 1990-1993. I do see the whimsy and the irony in your flurry of non-activity. Enjoy your vacation, and choose your bowling ball carefully. It's all in the heft.

— Reprinted from *Void-Post* 6.

## **CRITIQUE OF THE ART STRIKE**

The Bible narrates that the Jews conquered Jericho by playing the trumpets with such an intensity that the walls tumbled. Today, a group of artists have repeated this story with a certain difference. They want to destroy the walls of powerful art institutions by means of radical silence: by the refusal of all activities of art.

A total Art Strike has been suggested by Stewart Home and the PRAXIS Group for the three-year period of 1990-1993. This Art Strike is being organised by Art Strike Action Committees residing mostly in America and England. Several months after the start of the Art Strike, I received documents of the following kinds: statements and letters from artists, declarations by magazine editors active in the strike, and pages of discussion from the underground and serious press alike. These reactions portrayed a frustrated group of people. Major institutions did not take much notice of this strike, which was being directed against them. Furthermore, a debate raged among the organisers and other artists concerned with the Art Strike: does such a strike make any sense at all?

I took all the Art Strike documents available to me since the start of this action, and I tried to find out the reasons for this disturbance and frustration.

Stewart Home's reference to the successful 'strike' of Polish artists in the period after 1981 was an error and a starting point for a number of later mistakes.

A strike is A) an organised extortion; B) for a concrete purpose; C) by people who stand in opposition to their employer. There was not any artists' strike in Poland because A) it arose spontaneously and amorphously; B) for no concrete result; C) by independent careerists who took part in a general boycott against a military takeover. It was part of a national resistance in a desperate situation and it was an attempt to demoralise the authorities. It was combat; that is, a revolutionary act completely in the spirit of classical history.

The other action, Metzger's Art Strike (1977-1980), was planned as an economic strike, however, it failed because the individual producers failed to organise. Their

personal intents vary so greatly that every member of such a social group became scabs (even in the situations where some large institutions are acting as 'employers'). Furthermore, Metzger could not offer any concrete agenda to the individual participants in his strike, and no concrete organisation was brought forth to formulate and administer possible individual declarations.

In contrast, the current (second) Art Strike was planned as a political resistance and not as an economic strike. But a resistance is a general movement supported by a whole population, and its precondition is a kind of extreme emergency; that is to say, a 'revolutionary situation' is required. To imagine that intellectuals or artists would take part in such a resistance at any time (like a walk-out) because of their unique problems (as an attempt to break the monopoly of the institutions of the arts or to destroy the present cultural hierarchy) is simply not realistic. It is possible to build an administration corps for this job and propaganda can be distributed, as well; but one cannot create a revolutionary situation complete with the required general 'desperation.' Therefore, this attempt remains simply an advertisement, a campaign for something 'like a strike' with the usual mixed echoes that normally goes with a campaign among the intellectual elite (indeed, such internal affairs are always hysterical and turbulent, but the culture generally has trouble taking it seriously).

However there is another important fact of this strike. This is the very 'meta-physical' nature of the attempt: the strike was thought to be the refusal of all kinds of creative activity; that is, a radical form of silence. Let us say no more about the difficult question of reaching an audience with this silence, an audience that's been ignoring you all along anyway. We still have another question: how should artists who stop their activity act? What should they do?

The human being who goes on strike interrupts his professional activity. But the creative work of an artist doesn't work that way. Creativity can take different forms (not just artistic, but also such forms as being a mother, a politician, a gambler, for example) but it is never a profession. Instead, it is an existential question for each individual.

The artist can be forced to fulfil their work as a 'job,' but it will only last if one can succeed in 'changing their identity' as well. It's evident that the result would be enormous resistance against the attempt. An atmosphere similar to general desperation would need to be created, only it is not in favour of the idea but against it. All energy would be turned against it. The prevailing mood would be characterised by uncooperative aggressiveness, caused by the fear of losing one's identity.

In an optimum state it can have a very useful effect. The Polish resistance after the declaration of the state of war in 1981 had the following interesting result: the artists produced more art than before – but this art was explicitly samizdat art, an aggressive expression turned against the ruling elite. These artists would lose their identity only if they continued their earlier professional work in the style of 'fine art' (a highly interesting situation).

I visited some artist friends in Kracow and Wroclaw a year and a half after the takeover, and this underground activity had at that time just reached its peak. Some

older 'constructivist' artists — real 'museum' artists — left behind their abstract style and made small graphics and text designs in the form of leaflets, sometimes in a brutal realistic style. It was not the expression of a culture but of a primary demand of vital interests. This was a very strange form for an agitative 'post modernism' to take, considering it came after a very aesthetic abstract art period.

I think this feature of the human being and the nature of creativity wasn't taken into consideration in the present Art Strike. The ASAC in California treated it in a better way: it took up in its programme the idea that artists whose art was turned against serious culture and elite institutions should expand their activity. Also other publications emphasised that creativity should grow and not decrease during the strike. These concepts should function as a resistance and could ensure that the coherence of the network remains intact, no matter if the strike has any success or not.

But anyway this notion collapsed at the start. A different concept took its place, one which I attribute to the initiator of the strike, Stewart Home. He calls for the total refusal of all kinds of creativity during the strike. Some activists took this call so seriously that they decided to stop their political and review activities and all kinds of public interventions, as well.

One might talk about the possibility that this rigorousness was a manifestation of a strong radicalism in the spirit of class struggle. There is no reason to deny it. But we can also consider another, more personal motivation with a philosophical background.

It seems that for Stewart Home, the feasibility of a strike is of minor importance. He postulates the use of underground culture as a testing ground for his idea. This programme is the strategic negation of all creative forms, seen as the current strategy of the artistic individual and art activity.

The various forms for such a negation that Home proposes (Multiple Names, Plagiarism, Art Strike) are all excellently conceived and deserve appreciation. Following from these ideas, I can see an opposition to the monopolistic nature of art institutions, which was caused by making the underground reflect upon these issues. This philosophy had exerted a great influence on the underground and the alternative art scene long before the Art Strike became current. Of course, such concepts, built with such virtuosity, have little to do with a political programme. It is a rather ordinary cultural accomplishment.

To combine it with politics is dangerous. Since a few people have adopted the opinion that only active negation can be the strategy of true creativity, the import of this highly abstract philosophy into the arena of the strike resulted in the strike (which was hopeless anyway) losing its creative energy from the start.

Another question is: to what extent was Home aware of the fact that he himself with this conception had brought into being an instrument which could be suitable for buttressing authority? This authority would be able to discipline a part of the artistic subculture. (It is in fact much easier to control a negation than a production). Home was very narrow-minded concerning productive activity in general and the forms of independent art activity in the alternative scene in particular (see the

recent issues of *Smile* magazine or his book, *The Assault On Culture*).

Home had the enormous gall to postulate a general validity for his own ideas. I don't know if he realised at all that in the case of the total participation of the underground in a strike which lasted three years, the whole network would decay. Or is there not much to regret? (Maybe this egomania is an element taken from Neoism. But Stewart Home had this mentality before his Neoist period began: his first known project was a band he was in called White Colours. His aim was to have all bands in England call themselves White Colours).

Even when I pay respect to the expression of Home's opinions, I must say: this is not an explicitly leftist mentality, and as political activity, it has nothing at all to do with the emancipation of humanity. It is much more an aristocratic phenomenon or – in the microcosm of the alternative scene – a standardising of all opinions according to the model of totalitarianism.

We can also say that we have to face the problem of difference between intellectual abstraction and practical thought. We can thank Stewart Home that the second Art Strike was begun at all, but in reality the views and ambitions which initiated the strike were major causes for frustration, as well. But, the first months of the strike demonstrated that a lot of problems could not be solved without this crisis. What these problems are begins to become clearer now, and this is a positive result. But good motives need better and more professional instruments. Maybe because of this lesson the Art Strike was worth the trouble.

— Geza Perneckzy

## **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND OPINIONS ABOUT THE ART STRIKE**

### **1 – How can one participate in the Art Strike (1990-1993)?**

Sure, such a distressing perspective is disorienting to some. As for the Art Strikers, their tactics vary. Stewart Home in London (who thought up the Art Strike), seems to have chosen a total strike of creativity, which includes all activity related to the Art Strike (1990-1993). He is limiting his activity to dispatching only documents concerning the Art Strike that were produced before January 1, 1990, to whomever asks for them. He explains (in a letter dated November 8, 1989): '...Setting up an ASAC simply means providing the public with an address from which they can get information about the Art Strike and organising any other activities which you think might help spread the idea...'

In Iowa, Lloyd Dunn has interrupted the publication of his magazine PhotoStatic for three years. Instead, he publishes the sporadic and quasi-anonymous newsletter YAWN, almost totally dedicated to the Art Strike (1990-1993). I have found certain of the proposals advanced therein to be excessive, such as its characterisation of 'The Artist as a Victim of Tourette Syndrome,' which suggests that artists are pathologically dependent on their need to create, like a nervous tic (issue 7, 31/12/89). On the other hand, I notice this declaration: 'There is no Art Strike dogma as such. Instead, it is essential that each Art Strike participant construct their own set of activities in support of the Art Strike.' (issue 6, 24/11/89).

## **2 – It consists of a paradox ...**

Sure, the proposition of an Art Strike (1990-1993) is paradoxical, incredible, illogical, bizarre, incoherent, extremist, masochistic, unrealistic and pretentious, but it is a social action that has as its primary goal the deliberate provocation of annoyance.

## **3 – Isn't this plous Art Strike (1990-1993) doomed to failure by lack of impact?**

Sure, this is a possibility. In YAWN it says, 'the Art Strike (1990-1993) can only affect those people who choose to be affected by it...' (issue 11, 1/3/90). But in Cicero it says: '...Even if the goodness(that we seek)were not recognised, it would still be good; for whatever we can say in all truth is commended by its own good nature, even if not approved by any man living.' (On Moral Obligation, I.4.14).

## **4 – Art is already a strike**

Sure, there is something to this. On this subject, Lloyd Dunn proposed in the 40th and last issue of PhotoStatic (December 1989): '...the Art Strike is not so much a call for doing nothing as it is a call for doing something else. Now, it is quite plausible, according to my interpretation of the intent of the Art Strike, for a person (whether they think they are doing 'art' or not) to participate in the Art Strike and yet continue to do what they were doing before! As far as I can tell, the Art Strike lashes out at a set of attitudes about art; not 'art' as such. To clarify my position on this, it is perhaps necessary for us to have two definitions for the word 'art,' 1) art: virtually any creative activity, definable by the user of the term themself; and 2) Art: a class and gender-specific activity devoted to the creation of marketable objects... The Art Strike simultaneously calls for a rejection of Art, and a re-evaluation of art. To be effective, the Art Strike must demoralise Artists, and encourage artists.'

— Reprinted from *Lettre Documentaire* No. 9, 25/4/90.

## **STOP THE ART STRIKE**

The 1990-1993 Art Strike, which is currently being proposed by an international consortium of petty egomaniacs, needs to be shot dead, summarily executed without delay. The reasons for this conclusion are perfectly clear, as Richard Nixon would say, and I shall outline them in this brief paper.

The theoretical Marxist gobbyallygooke (Middle English spelling) that is the fountain from which this proposal ejaculates is logically unsound, although fascinating in its dire lack of intelligence. This is clearly evident when one examines the main Art Strike argument, which is that somehow Art is a tool, a 'commodity' used by an elite to 'repress' the masses. I hereby challenge the organisers of this mess to find ten seriously impoverished people willing to sign an affidavit to the effect that their condition is due to the business practices of Art Galleries. Imagine Geraldo Rivera crawling through the streets of East Oakland, asking street philosophers to recount personal episodes of terror at the hands of Piedmontian curators! Of course the outcome would be that of an empty television well, with a greasily handsome Geraldo wringing his hands. He would be

lucky to even find a downtrodden person who gives an Albanian hoot about Art, or Artists, or their picayune opinions. Art simply doesn't matter to the vast majority of individuals. But to this, the smug Marxist would retort: 'But the masses have yet to be enlightened as to the cause of their condition!' What sanctimonious, pig-headed borscht! The man pushing a shopping cart down the street would much rather have a T-bone steak marinated with Narsai's Special Sauce than a thousand tickets to performances at Artists' Television Access (a San Francisco establishment that sponsored an Art Strike event)! And rightly so, for his survival is, and should be, paramount. Whether or not there are Art geniuses has bugger all to do with the immediacy of his condition. If the self-satisfied organisers of this bird-brainish strike were really interested in helping the masses, they'd be proposing a TV-dinner round-up for the homeless! They'd be putting their money where their fat mouths are, so to speak.

It is also clear that the instigators of this foolishness are bent on being famous, and that they are insanely jealous of financially successful artists. This is a case of sour Bulgarian grapes, under the guise of proletarian revolt. It is usually the case that when revolutionaries seize power, they become just as repressive as their former masters; if the organisers of this effort were actually to stop Art production, they would be in the best position in terms of financial gain. Fortunately, I feel confident that this little temper tantrum by a collective of spoiled artistic brats can be nipped in the bud, castrated from the consciousness of creativity. But only if you follow my instructions, and act now. If you agree with this analysis, you'll do the following:

**1** Mail the letter (below) to:

Artists' Television Access  
922 Valencia Street  
San Francisco CA 94103

*"Dear ATA: I refuse to participate in the 1990-1993 Artists' Strike. As a matter of fact, I pledge to do everything in my power to encourage more Art production. I also think that the organisers of this effort are a bunch of cry-babies trying to feather their nests and make a mess on the floor."* (Signed).

**2** Refuse to participate in the strike, if it ever really materialises.

**3** Encourage others to create works of Art. Creativity is good for people.

— **Anatoly Zyyxx**

## **ART NO MORE – Extracts**

(...) Maybe it's worth investigating The Fifth International Festival of Plagiarism. Organised by Transmission's William Clark and the prolific London based writer of texts, Stewart Home, it brings together a loose association of artists whose work is in some way participatory and proudly unoriginal.

Home is a veteran of previous Festivals, a number of exhibitions, including 1987's *Desire In Ruins* at the Transmission, and is one of the key figures in

expressing the role of plagiarism in art.

Art itself, he argues, is chained to bourgeois values which shackle us all, not only by promoting the tastes and ideals of the dominant culture, but directly upholding capitalism by doing so. The claims for some art to be a vehicle for social change are therefore bogus, since the perception of art and artists and the structures of the art world will inevitably support the status quo.

Plagiarists oppose art's elitism, the praise heaped upon artists in direct proportion to their incomprehensibility to the general public and the process by which works of art become commodities to be dealt with like stocks and shares. Central among their concerns is the elitist myth (popular among artists themselves) of the artist as a genius with unique insights. (...)

To draw attention to what art has become, the plagiarist group PRAXIS has called for an Art Strike, basically a withdrawal of labour like any other industrial action. The idea was first proposed by Gustav Metzger, who in 1974 called for artists to cease producing, selling or discussing their work between the years 1977-80. Despite Metzger's lack of impact, the plagiarists are calling for another three-year Art Strike beginning in 1990.

Metzger's vision was of galleries and art magazines folding and artists, unable to stop creating, being coerced into camps where their work would be destroyed as it was produced. The PRAXIS idea of the strike is less ambitious, and focused on the role of the artist and how he or she engages with the surrounding culture. It's crucial to their view to disrupt the myth of 'the artist as someone who has these uncontrollable creative urges, and to show that you can stop and start at will.' But a great deal of its meaning, according to one of Home's pamphlets, 'lies not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war.'

And where does the art of plagiarism feature in this? Liberally borrowing from the writings of Roland Barthes, it emphasises the productive role that the audience has to play, 'Rather than passively receiving a work, they recreate it when they read a book or look at a picture,' explains Stewart Home. 'In the pure sense it's not plagiarism at all because that would entail taking ideas and claiming them as your own. It's a polemical use of the word to focus attention on the problems in the area. We're drawing attention to the fact that we're using other peoples' ideas.'

'The Festival of Plagiarism is partly just to show a lot of the things that are going on around the world and also to deal with the whole issue of copyright laws, which seem a little ridiculous in the light of all the machinery we've got right now. Videos, xerox machines - it's actually impossible to enforce the laws that are there. So it's making a point about that, and obviously ownership in relation to that. Also it's interesting that the idea of the ownership of ideas is quite a recent phenomenon, since the 18th century.'

With every succeeding plagiarism a new layer of meaning is added. This, says Home, makes it a highly creative process. And anyone can do it. That it subverts accepted notions of artistic value, linked in this society with ethics about labour time and production makes it a worthy snub of capitalist dogma, or at least that's the idea. But to the observer, what is really the difference between a plagiarist's vent



and one of the avant-garde works they rail against for being 'tainted by the avant-garde fraction of the bourgeoisie?'

'It's problematic, but art is basically what the bourgeoisie say is art, and although I can control what I do now, I can't control what happens to it in twenty years time, and it might well be considered art in twenty years time. The point is not to claim any universal validity for what we're doing, and not to assume that people should be interested in what we're doing – which is the basis of most funding for the arts and the basis of any justification for it, the idea that it has a humanising function. Whereas, we say, this is just what we want to do and we happen to be interested in this, there are no grand claims for it, or claims that it has some kind of deep significance and therefore ought to interest people. (...)

— **Alastair Mabbott**, *The List* No. 99, Edinburgh 26/7/89.

## THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ART STRIKE

### Written during the Fifth International Festival of Plagiarism, Glasgow 1989

The Art Strike can only be propagated on the basis of a limited idea of what art is. If art is everything, according to the definition of Dada and Fluxus, an Art Strike would be death.

The propagators of the Art Strike agree that it is intended to break the barrier between so-called 'low' and so-called 'high' culture. But if these persons would not think and work themselves into those categories, they could neither demand nor do the Art Strike.

If art is everything – and I cannot reduce my definition of 'art' to a more restricted one – the word has no meaning at all. Therefore I propose to give up the word 'art.'

If there is no art, you do not need an Art Strike.

Perhaps the desire for the Art Strike is more interesting than the idea itself. Some possible reasons:

In a world where creativity is split up and cannot be described by definitions or names ('Neoism' and 'Plagiarism' are desperate attempts), unity shall be gained by non-action, if it is impossible by action. This is obvious in the concept of the exhibition ('Reversal of Slogans/Slogans of Reversal'). A slogan is always demanding unity, and slogans are the essence of Neoism and Plagiarism.

Art Strike and death: the information sheet about the Festival includes the (simplifying) sentence 'Plagiarism is for life, Post-modernism is for death.'

Since Duchamp, originality ('anti-plagiarism') seemst o be possible only by self-destruction, mainly of the body (Vienna Actionism, Chris Burden, etc). In fact, the Art Strike idea results from the wish to do something original and it is self-

destructive as well (see second statement). Perhaps there is a subconscious desire for death, which led to the idea of an Art Strike, although strictly denied by its propaganda. (Thoughts not finished).

— **Florlan Cramer**, first published in *PhotoStatic* 38, Iowa, Autumn 89.

## **STEWART HOME INTERVIEWED BY SIMON REYNOLDS – Extract**

(...) I nearly missed Stewart Home, caught him just days before he began a three year 'Art Strike' from 1990-1993, during which he'll neither produce nor discuss any work. Again, it's a 'borrowed' idea.

"I read about this artist, Gustav Metzger, who'd declared a cultural strike between 1977-80, and thought 'Why don't we have one?' And I've been planning it for five years. The idea is so ludicrous, it's really funny. Metzger's idea was that after three years, the bourgeois art economy would collapse and artists could return and dictate how their work was received. But of course, artists are all in competition with each other for sales and gallery spaces, so it never worked. I just wanted to attack this idea of the artist who works incontinently, has all this creativity spewing out uncontrollably. I wanted to demystify the process. Coz being an artist isn't this magical process."

In order to go on strike, Home first had to become an artist 'It was like a dare. I'd been in punk bands, got bored and then decided to apply the 'anyone can do it' idea to the art world. I started on the avant-garde fringe and then brazened my way into doing straight gallery installations. I wanted to see if I could legitimise myself.'

'The thing to remember about critics is that they go along to review an exhibition and if your programme notes sound plausible and they can just lift your words, they're more likely to review it. So I found that how you write the press release, how you use theory to bullshit and intimidate the gallery owners, was crucial. All this negotiation has to be undertaken before something is accepted as 'art.' And I pulled it off.'

'I'm "legitimate": the British Council paid for me and my collaborators to take a show to Sweden. I've got press cuttings, art journals in America write to me asking for theoretical pieces. The annoying thing is that I'm going on strike just when I've started making enough money to live on it. But I'm glad to stop really. Having a career in art is boring.'

What will you do?

'Well, coz I've been so involved in all this nonsense for five years, I've built up an enormous collection of pulp literature that's unread. That should keep me occupied. And I'm looking around for a job. Trouble is, I'm over qualified. Most employers can't understand why I'd turn my back on being an artist.'

— *Melody Maker*, London 20/1/90.

# **EXTRACTS FROM BLOATSTICK NO. 2**

## **- ART STRIKE ISSUE, SPRING 1990**

### **ART STRIKE: A STALINIST CRITIQUE (AN ATTACK ON THE LEADERSHIP)**

- 1 The Art Strike leadership is made up of predominantly White American and British Middle-class males (to obfuscate matters more they sometimes use women's names as AKAs). These men do not survive via wages or salaries from the art world they criticise. Will they strike and condemn the capitalist occupational (mainly white collar or service industry) structures that provide them with their livelihoods in solidarity with striking artists?
- 2 With no Artists' Union how can there be a successful art strike?
- 3 What is Art Strike's relationship with Labour Culture and Labour Unions? Is it an appropriation of Labour terminology or has Art Strike initiated a dialogue with working people?
- 4 In showing an Art Strike booklet to a young African-American student she said to me, 'Why, they've been doing that in the projects for decades.' Does the leadership realise the inherent class, racial and larger occupational structures of privilege, that form and limit their peer group?
- 5 Do they plan to address these larger issues of predominant culture along with those of less visible, yet more radical culture, since their current sexual, racial and class tendencies seem to now preclude their participation in those cultures, or will they remain elitist?
- 6 What is Art Strike's relationship with and commentary on the Cultural Democracy Movement, the AIDS ACT-UP coalition, Art Against Apartheid, Art Against AIDS and other activist groups that use art and performance in Dissent?
- 7 Art Strike leadership offers us a perceptive analysis of the art industry's cooption into the spectacle of advanced Capital but only the vaguest inklings of how to survive or practice culture outside or in opposition to this Spectacle. Can you be more specific?
- 8 Does the Art Strike also realise their focused critiques of the art world are delivered in the language of that world and are thereby appropriated to the Spectacle of that same world?
- 9 Will Art Strike leaders become involved in any direct organising outside of pamphleteering and annual exhibitions?
- 10 What are the resources of the leadership?
- 11 Why the anonymity?
- 12 Does the leadership of Art Strike naively anticipate a spontaneous anarchic uprising in the social/occupational group of the art world at any time? Does Art Strike use this fantasy as an excuse to avoid a commitment to union organising and leadership?

- 13 The artists you would desire to strike won't... being the commercial artists and organisations they are satisfied with their participation in the Spectacle of Capitalism because they reap its benefits. To my knowledge you have usually lobbied only the alternative non-profit liberal art world, who will support your intentions, but not to the point of joining you in any action as radical as a strike. Artists any further to the left, along with other disenfranchised groups, are usually excluded from the art world system you have targeted, and for all practical purposes have been 'striking' for years, please comment on this contradiction.
- 14 As a satirist and a cultural organisation administrator whose actual food and rent comes from the art world, your laissez faire and cynical intellectualism offers me, and I assume others, no incentive to strike. You seem both incapable of providing leadership, succour, resources, radical alternatives to the current structure, or most importantly solidarity with other workers. Please offer us further definitive strategy.
- 15 Your critical commentary is appreciated although I know the Art industry sucks. But I also know that the Real Estate industry and the Military industry suck. Why don't you try to get them to strike?

— **Marshall Webber**

## **CONFESSIONS OF AN ART STRIKE COMMITTEE MEMBER**

**'I'm a microscope on that secret place where  
we all want to go...' — *The Mekons***

Really almost no one is arguing against the Art Strike on its own terms. Who is against liberty? But the strike is far outnumbered by people too fearful or cynical to make that equation, or to realise that the Art Strike as it's been formulated is incapable of hurting a cockroach, or an artist. It would be fair to say that the organisers of the strike are so obsessed with preventing individual accumulations of power that they have guaranteed the strike's marginality.

The Art Strike is, in fact, a wholly benevolent, if inefficient, tendency devoted to gift-giving, correspondence, and doing good deeds for the community, sort of like a non-hierarchical Lions or Kiwanis club. The apocalyptic rhetorical style favoured by many strikers — I am not innocent — is just our version of grandiose titles, secret handshakes and ornamental robes. Or rather, that is how it would be viewed if the strike were successful, which is to say if the techniques by which artists and other in-groups alienate themselves were to be rendered impotent by a mass rejection of the practice. The Art Strike cannot do other than eliminate itself along with the other crap. We always said the Art Strike was the worst idea ever, we made posters that said so. Yet it was so much more attractive that the workable,

'realistic' ideas that it opposed. This embrace of absurdity was one of several liberations I experienced during a year long experiment that was also at times boring, circular, frustrating and tedious.

Obviously the Art Strike lacked the commitment, energy, appeal and public relations of Dada or Punk, which may only mean that it lacked a money angle, but I insist it was, like those, a magic phrase, the mere incantation of which could stir violent antipathy in some and almost instantaneous gut comprehension in others. There was a short period during which the words 'Art Strike' were truly my words, and during that period I was able to step up in front of a group of people without any preparation and command their attention in a way that I never could before or since. I understood in my guts that nothing was true and permitted myself to say anything. I blithely advocated at least five separate platforms depending on the mood and the company. I contradicted myself wildly, in the belief that paradox is where language warps because it's gotten close to reality, and that certain contradictions in the text can be the doorways out of it. Whenever I became insecure about my image, I could feel the energy dissipating. It was only then that anyone ever looked to me for leadership.

I burned out on the discussion after a while and lost my natural grasp of its essence, a grasp which had enabled me to carry on long, valuable discussions without feeling that I had to win each point, a habit of mine that kills conversation and makes me a monologist. The right thing to say is of course the thing that contributes to the flow and energy of the discourse, and the pleasure of saying the right thing is sublime. One time a friend commented on how frequently I was saying the right thing and naturally that stopped me.

The other joy of the Art Strike was the way we dealt with written text. Anything anyone wrote about the strike immediately became common property. I saw my phrases appear without the slightest disjunction in other peoples' writing and I freely incorporated theirs. Hardly anything was signed. This approach was not taken out of a desire to mystify, but out of an honest recognition that the force which made the strike work, to the extent that it did work, was not the contributions of individuals but the simple fact that we were acting in community, that none of us knew anything about the Art Strike except what we had worked out together.

I have focused on the success of a few personal interactions instead of 'dismantling the dominant cultural apparatus' because, to make it as plain as possible, that's what it's all about. The dominant cultural apparatus is in our heads and its function is separation. It makes us lie to each other, exploit each other, compete with each other and fear each other. Art Strike as a proposal functioned as a wake up call, saying in effect, that even artists adhere to a sense of the status quo, unconsciously assuming privileges and burdens that might better be shared equally by all. Art Strike as an event, if it could be truly realised, would be more terrifying and beautiful than any work of art. And it would change the world.

— Aaron Noble, December 1989.

## **I WILL NOT OBSERVE THE ART STRIKE FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS**

I thought we already had one for the last decade.

I believe the local galleries have 3 years worth of dead artists' work already stockpiled.

LeRoy Neiman endorsed it.

It will do nothing whatsoever.

It is a parody of strikes; how about artists supporting real strikes?

If you want to press an issue, you have to start with small actions and build momentum; then you can do big ones.

There doesn't seem to be any affinity or outreach with labour unions, homeless activists or others fighting for change. It is thus isolated and NO strike can succeed without public support.

I'm operating under the assumption that the mainstream culture has already collapsed. We've got video cameras, monitors, printers, tape recorders etc, what the hell do we need from mainstream culture?

The 7.0 Loma Prieta Art Strike was enough for me.

— **Fred Rinne**, October 1989

## **MESSAGE FROM CARL ANDRE**

### **TO THE CALIFORNIAN ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEE**

Congratulations for furthering the cause of capitalism! The drive of advanced capital proletarianises the primitive capitalist. The Luddites broke machines because they did not want to become wage-labourers. Wage-labour only for all artists! Up the rich! All artists to the sweat shops! Let no worker own his own production.

## **WALKING ACROSS SCABBY WATER —**

### ***Extract***

(...) I guess because I'm so involved with the network of people who are participating in the Art Strike and the Festival of Non-Participation, I felt like I had to have a formal response; which is where the ART SCABS FOR THE ART GLUT comes from. The phrase 'Art Strike' is valuable for the effect it would have on

mainstream or commercial media because it's an idea which the media isn't familiar with. In terms of my own life I need some sort of hyper-activity, and along with hyper-activity you have to have the affirmative strategies that go along with it. I like the notion of an Art Strike because it's a sensation. It creates an immediate response from anyone and it might go no further than that. But then again, if someone who is an artist replaces painting with cooking food, I don't really think that the actual impulses which make both those things happen is any different. The Art Strike seems to be a denial of the avant garde... There is such an enigma attached to the people behind the strike. Stewart Home, by creating an Art Strike is making himself an object of art and that's another one of those contradictions. (...)

There are two qualities about the Art Strike. The first, which interests me very little, is the quality of denial which is something we all did when we were very young. It was the only kind of reaction we could have, very primitive kind of response, i.e. 'I don't wanna do it.' The other quality, which I am intrigued by, which is what I will try to study about the Art Strike, is the quality of invisibility, how you take something and make it disappear. It may have the same effects and energies but it doesn't have to exist. You're making the impulse of creativity disappear. If I could be in an existence that doesn't have a constant influx of media, I would be very interested in a kind of invisible culture. I think the Art Strike has to admit that there is a basic human response which is creativity and nothing short of lobotomy can get rid of that. The Art Strike teaches how to have some sort of cognition of what is going on without having to channel it through making painting all your life. (...)

— **Mlekal And**, *Factsheet Five* No. 33, Winter '89.

## **STRUCK BY THE ART STRIKE (AN ART GLUT PREAMBLE) – Extracts**

What I do like about the Art Strike is that it's such a strong issue. It's got everyone riled up. Nobody feels wishy washy about it, people appear to be either gun-ho or angrily against it. The whole notion of the Art Strike forces us to think twice about what we're doing, examine the role of art in society, in history etc. (...)

I'm sorry, I have to laugh when I remember asking John Berndt what he was going to do during the Art Strike. I laugh as much at my own frame of mind at the time as I do about his answer, since at that time I hadn't really formulated any thoughts on the Art Strike, and was a bit in awe of the whole idea, especially the fact that some people actually were taking it seriously. John said that among other things, when 1990 came he was going to study electronics and I remember thinking, wow, maybe I should strike and start studying languages, or areas in science that have always interested me. But now it's so clear that I am doing those things, not in a contrived manner, but in the natural path of my art life. If there had

never been an Art Strike, I'm sure John, being an extremely intelligent person, would have studied electronics anyway at some point, and quite naturally have integrated it into his creative work. (...)

Stewart Home, whom I see as the mastermind behind the Art Strike, has thought about language and its influence, and also about identity, but I think his emphasis misses the point... Home's major point... is that 'the avant-garde' manipulates language to form an identity for itself based on appearances of 'rupture,' 'difference' and 'refusal'... Home... stat(es) that "Marinetti's verbal attacks upon the artistic ideals of the past were never intended to be taken as anything other than the means for creating a symbolic 'rupture' with entrenched tradition." As if physical action is the only way to change things. Home sounds like a militant anarchist here, but something else became clear to me.

I was intrigued by this last essay in Home's Handbook: I kept feeling that the crux of the Art Strike was hidden in it. Suddenly it hit me! The Art Strike is an art piece, deftly created by master Home, using all of us artists and our various responses to the strike as his materials. It really is a brilliant piece and as avant-garde as one could get: it's challenging, shocking, makes a lot of people think and has elicited strong reactions in a number of directions. The Art Strike is an art work riddled with ambiguity, hidden meanings, food for action and controversy. And, to use Home's own phrases, it has created and perpetuated its identity by language, by the printed word — pamphlets, postcards, slogans and logos, articles, broadsides, even buttons! Home is doing with the Art Strike exactly what he appears to be criticising in the article, and he's doing it consciously! Confusing, eh? Ambiguous, even perverted, for artists are actually stopping their creative endeavours(...) Is it a movement 'backed up by physical action?' In a sense yes, but it's a negation, advocating 'physical' non-action. Paradoxically, the idea of not doing art teaches us a lot about art, just as John Cage's famous "4' 33" in masquerading as silence reveals the vast realm of sound. Again, whether or not he intended it as such (and the uncertainty is titillating), Stewart Home has created a big and important art work for the avant-garde.

The morning after I wrote most of this essay and began to see the Art Strike as an art work, we got a piece of mail which confirmed this vision. John Berndt sent us the latest Art Strike rhetoric: 'Critics Praise Stewart Home!' This piece is so obviously tongue-in-cheek, it doesn't even pretend to be serious. It made me see the Art Strike in yet another light: as a scam, a ploy, an imaginary event, a joke. And I think Stewart must be laughing the hardest, all the more when people take it very seriously. Not that the Art Strike is a totally empty joke: it has caused a huge stir, and will 'go down' in experimental underground history. Whatever it is, I am not angry at Stewart and his kin (how many of them see as big a picture of it as Stewart, though?), rather I am grateful for the food for thought, and for the opportunity to respond with our own movement — the Art Glut! Long live Rhetoric! Long live controversy! Long live Stewart Home! Long live the Avant-Garde, and may it stay avant rather than derriere.

— **Elizabeth Was**, circulated as an undated manuscript.



## **ART STRIKE**

We call on all cultural workers to put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit, or discuss their work from January 1st 1990 to January 1st 1993. We call for all galleries, museums, agencies, 'alternative' spaces, periodicals, theatres, art schools &c., to cease all operations for the same period.

Art is conceptually defined by a self-perpetuating elite and marketed as an international commodity. Those cultural workers who struggle against the reigning society find their work either marginalised or else co-opted by the bourgeois art establishment.

The ruling class uses art as a 'transcendental' activity in the same way it once used religion to justify the arbitrariness of its enormous privilege. Art creates the illusion that, through activities which are actually waste, this civilisation is in touch with 'higher sensibilities' which redeem its other activities. Those who accept this logic support the bourgeoisie even if they are economically excluded from the class. The concept that 'everything is art' is the height of this smoke-screen, meaning only that certain members of the ruling class feel particularly free in expressing their domination of the proletariat to one another.

To call one person an 'artist' is to deny another the equal gift of vision; thus the myth of 'genius' becomes an ideological justification for inequality, repression and famine. What an artist considers to be his or her identity is a schooled set of attitudes; preconceptions which imprison humanity in history. It is the roles derived from these identities, as much as the art products mined from reification, which we must reject.

Unlike Gustav Metzger's Art Strike of 1977-1980, our intention is not to destroy those institutions which might be perceived as having a negative effect on artistic production. Instead, we intend to question the role of the artist itself and its relation to the dynamics of power within capitalist society.

The above is a text from a leaflet promoting the Art Strike 1990-1993. We have a definition of a particular way that creativity is channelled in present society — Art.

It asserts that art is bourgeois and elitist. You only have to compare the coverage in the tabloids and the 'quality' papers in terms only of square centimetres devoted to its propagation to reveal the class emphasis of something that apologists claim to have universal value.

When the artists and administrators choose to make work 'accessible' it is in the hallowed chambers of the secular cathedrals, the gallery and museum. People are ushered in, to pay their respects to the relics, the dead skin of the humanist saints.

Artists of course lead the way, blazing new trails, boldly decorating where no one could be bothered before. This seeps down to us lesser mortals in the form of exciting new adverts, repackaged goodies and novelty philosophies readily bowdlerised by colour supplement hacks.

The insistence on metaphor and allusion to placing in the art historical context make it a coded world as specialist and mystifying as stamp collecting.

Commodification is, if not an inevitability, financially useful. Art objects are the next step up the ladder from executive toys. Intellectual arguments surrounding works become interesting accessories. Neo-Expressionism competes with Minimalism for the market share in much the same way as Acid House does with Techno. The most trite examples of this tendency are companies like Hunter and Philip Morris, the one a bomb manufacturer, the other a tobacco corporation, both arts sponsors and both responsible for thousands of deaths, maybe attempting a little expiation by applying a philanthropic gloss to their facades.

Art creates a false sense of space, an illusionary sanctuary where integrity and intellectual freedom flourish untainted by the coarser aspects of life. From this radical nature reserve, artists feel that they, when conscience dictates, are able to make forays into social and political activity. The activist artist is always more interested in success within the art sphere rather than a realignment of society where our stolen creativity is repossessed. A recent, particularly crass, instance of this is the US artists who painstakingly reconstructed a shanty town in a gallery.

Precisely because of the free reign that they feel they have been allowed, artists are able to fine tune the order of appearances. In this way artists, like other professional intellectuals, become valuable technicians of dominant culture.

Whatever doesn't kill power is killed by it. This is as true for paintings of the reproductive organs of certain plants nicely arranged in a vase as for self-consciously critical work. There are several possible responses.

To produce art in a strictly formal way. Refine it to a craft of technical, aesthetic and mathematical precision. The old cliché of art for art's sake, and why not? The problem only occurs when the structure of society detaches the by-product of an individual period of creativity, maybe with the artist's connivance, and institutes it as a sterile husk, a coinage.

To subvert it's supposed transcendence from within by producing superficial work in the hope that art might implode under the immense density of it's own meaninglessness. In this way a lot of self-importantly named Post Modernist art simply reels out knowingly bad jokes. But you can only play about with the pieces of shit for so long.

Others have tried to widen the boundaries of art. To achieve the aestheticisation of all life. Instead of turning inwards, thrust it out. This can be the highly romantic view put forward by Oscar Wilde or the Surrealists. It can also end up with the nice looking flat roofs of Corbusier that just happen to leak like sieves, or result in the missionary zeal of the community artists, rushing round worried that the vast majority have always been on Art Strike, desperate to introduce us to the delights of arty-farty vicarious experience. Everyone grins themselves silly when they've got a multi-media arts complex. To an extent this avoids the issue. By defining everything as art, the word loses any currency. (Which is probably a good idea).

We live in the most highly aestheticised point in history; adverts, TV, music, everything redesigned and repackaged with rabid ferocity. Muzak is the creation of a complete anaestheticism. Alone it is not enough. To expand out into life effectively it must be part of a broader onslaught, ideological and economic as well

as cultural. That's where the real fun begins.

Silence — the position of the Art Strike. This is possibly the worst, most incoherent response. When we go to bed, cook or laugh, do we do so for capita ? Although we are at present doing so in a society where the major benefactors are bastards, to credit them with complete control, accidental or not is a paranoid conspiracy theory. To talk of your existence merely in terms of strategy is to deny the most important and revolutionary impulse — pleasure.

On a level of mundanepacticality, the only people who go on strike are probably pretty decent anyway. (It would be great to get the pop star artists to shut up for a while though). To disarm ourselves of methods of struggle/creativity is doing the recuperators' job for them. Capitalism would of course be different, but would it be any better if nothing had ever been said against it? The strikers are very vocal in exactly why they choose to produce this art of silence.

The Art Strike has been claimed as a good 'propaganda art.' Why bother? I am only interested in a sustained period of real life — and will not exist as a theatrical symbol. Symbolic acts rely entirely on the media coverage given to them, as opposed to real acts which have a direct impact. In this aspect the strike becomes ultra-leftist posture politics. A holier than thou pose rather than the arty-farty one.

The most interesting idea to arise in support of the Art Strike is a calling into question of the role of 'artist' or 'politico.' Presumably the people who define themselves into these categories are making an honest attempt at a reaction to society. The trouble comes when they see themselves only in these terms. The reaction becomes a self-policed act of conformity. You still refer to yourself as 'artist' if you make a point of desisting from the practice known as 'art' for a certain period of time. It remains a defined role, albeit negative. Surely it is common sense to avoid this adoption of stereotypes, but to impose another on top makes an equal contradiction.

The voluntary shifting of roles can be fun, allowing for play, but then why only three years? And why do people have to do it at the same time? I can imagine the Art Strike Action Committees becoming self-help groups for those with cultural cold turkey. Silence = Death, not just for AIDS. Renunciation of creativity is a tactic of despair, not even that but the abandonment of any tactics whatsoever.

— No author credited, first published in *Leisure* No. 2, Cardiff, Autumn 1989.

## **NO ART FOR ART'S SAKE**

### **— Extracts**

Eliot 1 and Karen Eliot 2, 3, 4 and 5 make up Baltimore's Art Strike Action Committee, along with about 20 other less directly involved local artists. The group was formed last year in support of an international 'Art Strike,' which is set to begin this January 1 and end on that same date in 1993. Although movements have

popped up recently to fight cuts in National Endowment for the Arts grants and fight the censorship that goes with it (the Corcoran Gallery boycott — there's also 'A Day Without Art,' a call for galleries to close or hold AIDS benefits on December 1) — the wide-sweeping Art Strike that the Eliots demand has nothing to do with those issues. For that matter, it has nothing to do with pay, working conditions, or the other usual reasons for work action. (...)

'There have been 15 or 16 Art Strikes in the past,' Eliot 1 says, explaining the movement's history. 'Most of them have tended to frame their activities as being against specific regimes, or to make specific changes in the art world.' But he says the current strike is aimed at the art world's *raison d'être* — and not any one particular political ideology or artistic stance. 'This strike is more omnidirectional,' he says, 'It's intended to attack attitudes which claim to have universal significance.'

In other words, much of the strike is aimed at the egos of the artists themselves, which like the gallery circuit, have elevated the artist to a superior status in the intellectual and creative hierarchies.

'It's interesting to note that the great majority of artists I've met in my life seem to be particularly nervous about what they're doing,' Eliot 1, the group's unofficial spokesman says, 'They have a great deal of anxiety about whether or not it has any value. Essentially, what we're doing is trying to make it clear to them that it doesn't have any value at all. In fact, (the art) is negative and completely murderous and destructive (because of its links to a murderous and dehumanising ruling class).'

— **Michael Anft**, *Baltimore City Paper* 12/10/89.

## THE END OF EVERYTHING

### — *Extracts*

I wonder why those who speak of ending art are always artists. And haven't they been trying to end it for decades already? I remember Dada.

A couple of months ago, Anonymous sent me (and I thank her or him) a packet of Art Strike propaganda. 'Demolish Serious Culture' said the flyer. Art Strike Action Committees in London and San Francisco have declared the years 1990 to 1993 to be 'the years without art.' In the spirit of anti-art, I have since lost the information, but I recall it as a protest against — you know — the Commodity.

Now, for one thing, Tehching Hsieh already did this piece, though only for a year. During that period, he did not create, look at, read of, or talk about art. To strike, paradoxically, is to become an artist. It's a conceptual project.

The Strikers quote Jean Baudrillard's statement: 'Art no longer contests anything, if it ever did.' But does refusing to make art contest anything? If only it did.

— **C. Carr**, *Village Voice*, New York 14/11/89.

## **EXTRACT FROM NOVOID 7**

### **— ART STRIKE SPECIAL, DECEMBER 1989**

When reading about the Art Strike, one wonders what it really is. Is it just a puerile attention-getting device for a few 'artists' whose work would otherwise escape notice? Is it a stupid symbolic gesture, the product of anger against a defined target but with no clear plan of action? Or is it a serious response to cultural problems, which it has some chance of solving?

The A.S. isn't any one of these, but a combination of all three. I think many of its contradictions are a result of taking itself too seriously. Around a kernel of an idea there are the encumbrances of ideology, elitist snottiness and the smug virtuousness of the Politically Correct. These distractions caused me to reject the A.S. for a long time, and have probably caused others to reject it too.

Another fault of the A.S. is that it doesn't carry its point far enough. Yes, artists enjoy an artificially privileged role in society, but they are not alone. Writers, poets and musicians also get more acclaim than they deserve. This is significant since many A.S. organisers have announced that, instead of doing art during the strike period, they will write or work on musical projects. Only one, to my knowledge, has announced that he will follow the A.S. directive: 'Give up art. Feed the starving.' It is disheartening that the ASAC lacks the moral strength to enact what they preach. Righteousness, demanding of sacrifice but only from others, they resemble another group of phony preachers — televangelists. Could Stewart Home be the Jim Bakker of the avant-garde. I'm starting to think so.

All of this posturing should not be confused with the idea itself. When stripped of its extravagant wishful thinking, it's apparent that the A.S. wants change to result from the (in)action of individuals, and not the art world in its entirety. The art world will not give up its privileged status, that much is clear. If individuals, though, begin to question their role in it, then its effects on society are necessarily diminished.

Art, in the current cultural context, is noise. Some art might be interesting, or even subversive, but it is noise nonetheless. In response, artists can offer more noise, in the form of new 'art movements' or just more art, or they can offer silence. The A.S. is asking for this silence. In a time of constant bombardment with 'culture,' silence may be a welcome relief. If this is what the A.S. is after, then I support it.

I don't support, though, the A.S.'s political motivations. By inferring that the withholding of art will precipitate revolution, the ASAC is wrongly suggesting that culture consumption is a necessary part of society. This same error was made by the Situationists. It's unfortunate that the ASAC does not have the wisdom to recognise Situationism's shortcomings.

**— Colin Hinz**

## **NETWORKING THE '90s – Extract**

Art Strike serves a purpose in the current situation of mail art. It is a cleansing agent which is intended to get artists thinking about why they make art and whom they serve by doing so. After talking to Stewart Home, who originated the concept, it is my opinion that the concept is intrinsically connected to the English class system and an understanding of the extreme right and left politics that hold sway over there. For this reason, most North Americans, and indeed, those outside England, find the whole of the arguments difficult to grasp.

— Jon Held Jr., *Factsheet Five* No. 35, Spring 1990.

# **20 OF THE MOST DIFFICULT, AWKWARD AND SEARCHING QUESTIONS YOU COULD ASK ABOUT THE ART STRIKE 1990-93**

**1 What is the Art Strike?**

Art Strike is the total withdrawal of all cultural production for a period of 3 years (1990-1993). All artists will cease to distribute, sell, exhibit, or discuss their work between January 1st 1990 and January 1st 1993.

**2 What art will be struck?**

Art Strike is a total assault upon all cultural activity within the modernist and post-modernist traditions.

**3 Strike for what?**

To dismantle the cultural apparatus.

**4 Is this a joke?**

Absolutely not. How can you have shows when people don't even have shoes?

**5 What is the Art Strike?**

Art Strike is the rough undressing of creativity. What an artist considers to be his or her identity is nothing but a divisive set of schooled, snotty attitudes.

**6 What's wrong with being an artist?**

To call one person an artist is to deny another the equal gift of vision.

**7 What will I be if I'm not an artist?**

Think of how many people have experienced sexual ecstasy without even talking about making art.

**8 What's wrong with making art?**

We're living in an isolation tank, only instead of warm water we're bathing in bullshit. Within the information economy, opposition spreads the flow, each statement creates its own negation, context shifts constantly, and the only principle that emerges from the din is the principle of the flux itself, consumption.

- 9 What is the Art Strike?**  
Silence.
- 10 What do you expect to accomplish?**  
We will step outside of history.
- 11 Why should I go on strike?**  
Self-interest.
- 12 Is this a joke?**  
Sure: a joke, a fraud, the worst idea ever.
- 13 What is the Art Strike?**  
In its origins, just another cocky whiteboy spectacle. Now, however, girls are playing too.
- 14 What's in it for you?**  
We hope to promote our own careers. Of course, only the Strike's failure would accomplish this, so you don't get out of it that way.
- 15 Why do so many people hate this idea?**  
Because they stand to lose everything they don't have and wouldn't deserve even if they did have it.
- 16 Will sex be better in the years without art?**  
It goes without saying.
- 17 What is the Art Strike?**  
Art Strike is the ceremonial mask of a movement away from competitive art making and toward an acognitive culture.
- 18 Who's behind it?**  
Better that a thousand movements fail than one leader succeeds. Anyone can organise the Art Strike, many have.
- 19 Why 3 years?**  
In the first year the world will be a field of undifferentiated experience. In the second year figures will emerge from the background. In the third year an acognitive culture will arise.
- 20 Why must we stop making art?**  
Because the refusal of artistic identity is the only weapon left to us and the demolition of serious culture the only way ahead.
- Compiled by the *Art Strike Action Committee of California*, originally published as a flyer, Summer 1989.

## **CONFESSION**

### **IN SUPPORT OF THE 1990-93 ART STRIKE**

I may as well admit it from the start. They've been right all along, I'm useless, totally worthless.

But then, chances are, so are you, or you wouldn't be wasting your time reading this magazine. Not really wasting your time. Wasting the precious air that your excuse for a body is breathing, when you should be rotting in a rapidly disappearing

Amazonian jungle, performing the only function that you're good for, as compost. After all, isn't it about time that you did something for the trees after having deforested them for so long for the sake of making paper to put your silly, egotistical drawings on?

No, not wasting your time. This magazine might even be damn 'good' for your lowly conniving, pseudo-sensitive pollution you so ludicrously glorify as ART. Face it, you're a careerist of the most parasitic kind. At least admit that this *CoBalt* slop in printed form is no more than a sort of 'True Crimes' manual with pretensions of superiority. I have! When I realised that useful people like car mechanics, wet nurses and mad bombers have good reason to scorn my flights of imagination and abstract thinking, I was brave enough to blurt out to the world that I'm just another con artist. Just out for an unfairly easy living and a free meal. **JUST LIKE YOU!** (dirty scribbler). Do you have the guts to spill it out as honestly as I have? Or are you just going to snivel and complain in that cushy Bolton Hill (or wherever) apartment that your parents pay for because you're incapable of facing harsh reality long enough to support yourself? Or maybe you're too busy being duped into gentrifying someplace like Hollins Market so that the rich can get richer and the you-know-who can get you-know-what. Ever notice how many of your non-artist neighbours are going to prison? Avant-garde = Gentrification. Be it of the soul or of the city, when the artists come, there goes the neighbourhood.

Not that I'm any better than you are. That's why this is a confession. As my parent set (TENTATIVELY A CONVENIENCE) is infamous for having written, 'Artists are only good for three things: making glasses, basket-weaving and counterfeiting money.' Well put, but with all due respect, not going far enough.

Have you ever asked yourself why you're reading this magazine? Probably not so let me rub it in your mug. Oh, I'd say half of your motivation lies with your scummy need to pick up those little tricks of the trade like how to pretend to convince the government and corporations that you just might be smart enough to bad-mouth them if they don't give you payola to support your addle-brained pot habit — all so that they can pretend to be doing something socially useful by keeping you alive. Then there's your pathetic need to qualm your microscopic conscience with that big fat mutual pat on the back. 'Gee, you're sooooo talented! I just love the way you take that palette knife and squiggle it around like that! OOOHH! that really is great! That prick and pussy and horse tongue collage would really shock your mom and dad! Better not let them see it! (giggle).'

So what's the ballpoint of this? The **ART STRIKE**, the only answer to a problem we should've gotten rid of with the bubonic plague. In fact, why stop for just 3 years? Take a good look at yourself, stop exercising solely to get your mouth between your legs and give up art altogether. Do you want to be so ashamed of yourself that when you're fifty-five and your grandchildren come to visit you in the nursing home you can't even look them in the eye? Don't forget, if even they hate you, you won't be able to bum your fucking cigarette money off them.

Don't be more of a scab than you already are, **SUPPORT THE ART STRIKE!**  
— **Tim Ore**, originally published in the Maryland arts magazine *CoBalt*.



# THE INTERNATIONAL STRIKE OF ARTISTS?

## — Extracts

“Would you take part in an International strike of artists? As a protest against art system’s unbroken repression of the artist and the alienation from the results of his practice. It would be very important to demonstrate a possibility of co-ordinating activity independent from art institutions, and organise an international strike of artists. This strike should represent a boycott of art system in a period of several months. Duration, exact date of beginning, and forms of boycott will be worked out on the completion of the list of enrolled artists and propositions. Please give notice of this to the artists you know. The deadline for applications/suggestions is 15 May 1979.”

— I received about forty replies to this circular letter. Majority of artists expressed their reserve to this idea or doubt to the possibility of its realisation, but there were positive answers too.

The idea of the International artists’ strike is under present circumstances probably an utopia. However, as the processes of institutionalisation of art activities are being successfully applied even to the most radical art projects there is a possibility that this idea could one day become an actual alternative. I therefore believe that publishing of the replies I received could be of certain interest.

**Goran Dordevic**

Dear Goran,

Thank you for your letter and apologies for not writing sooner. I have, in fact, been on strike all summer, but it has not changed anything and I am anxious to begin work again, which I shall do very soon.

Good luck,

**Susan Hiller**

Dear Goran Dordevic,

Thank you for your letter of 22 Feb 79. I think the art system has the same relation to the world system that a seismograph has to an earthquake. You cannot change a phenomenon by means of the instrument that records it. To change the art system one must change the world system.

Be well

**Carl Andre**

Dear Goran,

Thanks for your letter. Personally I am already on strike of producing any new form in my work since 1965 — (i.e. 14 years). I don't see what I could do more —

Best Regards

**(Daniel) Buren**

Dear Goran,

Thank you for your communication on the proposed International Strike for Artists. I did not respond because I do not believe that this proposal is either efficient nor sensible.

Museums and commercial galleries will go on functioning very well without the co-operation of the socially concerned artist, and these of course would be the only ones to possibly join such a strike.

Rather than withholding socially critical works from the art-system every trick in the book should be employed to inject such works into the mainstream art world, particularly since they are normally not well received there.

Sincerely yours,

**Hans Haacke**

The reason Les Levine did not reply is because we receive literally thousands of circulars in the studio each month and it is impossible for Mr. Levine to respond personally to each one of these. We can only deal with personal mail. It's likely Mr. Levine didn't even see your circular. However, Les Levine is not interested in strikes of any sort, artists' or otherwise.

Yours sincerely,

**Mulberry Baxter**

Dear Goran,

(...) I am in complete agreement with what you say about institutions although it would be unproductive for me to join a strike. (...)

Yours,

**John (Latham)**

Dear Goran Dordevic,

Sorry to take so long, but rather than strike I spend all my energy on striking back at the art system by working around and outside of it and against it and letting it pay for my attempts to subvert it. (...)

All best,

**Lucy R. Lippard**

— First published in *Casopis Studenta Istorije Umetosti* 3/4, Yugoslavia 1980 —  
with dual Yugoslavian/English text.

## ART AND CLASS

Art, as a category, must be distinguished from music, painting, writing &c. Current usage of the term art treats it as a sub-category of these disciplines; one which differentiates between parts of them on the basis of perceived values. Thus the music of Philip Glass is considered art, while that of Adam and the Ants is not. This use of the term art, which distinguishes between different musics, literatures, &c., emerged in the seventeenth-century at the same time as the concept of science. Before this, the term artist was used to describe cooks, shoe-makers, students of the liberal arts, &c.

When the term art emerged with its modern usage, it was an attempt on the part of the aristocracy to hold up the values of their class as objects of irrational reverence. Thus art was equated with truth, and this truth was the world view of the aristocracy; a world view which would shortly be overthrown by the rising bourgeois class. As a revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie wished to assimilate the life of the declining aristocracy. However, since the activities of the bourgeoisie served largely to abolish the previous modes of existence, when it appropriated the concept of art it simultaneously transformed it. Thus beauty more or less ceased to be equated with truth, and became associated with individual taste. As art developed, the insistence on form, knowledge of form, and individualism (basically romanticism), were added to lend authority to the concept as a particular, evolving, mental set of the new ruling class.

— Stewart Home, first published in *Smile* 11, London Summer 1989.

### Further reading:

*Distinction: A Social Critique Of The Judgement Of Taste* Pierre Bourdieu (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1984).

*The Cult Of Art: Against Art And Artists* Jean Gimpel (Weidenfield & Nicolson, London 1969).

*Art, An Enemy Of The People* Roger L. Taylor (Harvester Press, Hassocks 1978).