

Artists engaged in political struggle act in two key areas: the use of their art for direct social change; and actions to change the structures of the art world. It needs to be understood that this activity is necessarily of a reformist, rather than revolutionary, character. Indeed this political activity often serves to consolidate the existing order, in the West, as well as in the East.

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose from the umbilical cord of the state. Art in the service of revolution is unsatisfactory and mistrusted because of the numerous links of art with the state and capitalism. Despite these problems, artists will go on using art to change society.

Throughout the century, artists have attacked the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art. These attacks on the organisation of the art world have gained momentum in recent years. This struggle, aimed at the destruction of existing commercial and public marketing and patronage systems, can be brought to a successful conclusion in the course of the present decade.

The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years – 1977 to 1980 – when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibition, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state.

The years without art will see the collapse of many private galleries. Museums and cultural institutions handling contemporary art will be severely hit, suffer loss of funds, and will have to reduce their staff. National and local government institutions for the financing and administration of contemporary art will be in serious trouble. Art magazines will fold. The international ramifications of the dealer/museum/publicity complex make for vulnerability; it is a system that is keyed to a continuous juggling of artists, finance, works and information – damage one part, and the effect is felt world-wide.

Three years is the minimum period required to cripple the system, whilst a longer period of time would create difficulties for artists. The very small number of artists who live from the practice of art are sufficiently wealthy to live on their capital for three years. The vast majority of people who produce art have to subsidize this work by other means: they will, in fact, be saving money and time. Most people who practice art never sell their work at a profit, do not get the chance to exhibit their work under proper conditions, and are unmentioned by the publicity organs. Some artists may find it difficult to restrain themselves from producing art. These artists will be invited to enter camps, where the making of art works is forbidden, and where any work produced is destroyed at regular intervals.

In place of the practice of art, people can spend time on the numerous historical, aesthetic and social issues facing art. It will be necessary to construct more equitable forms for marketing, exhibiting and publicising art in the future. As the twentieth century has progressed, capitalism has smothered art – the deep surgery of the years without art will give art a new chance.