

**YAWN** is a sporadic communiqué which seeks to provide a critical look at our culture in all its manifestations. We welcome responses from readers, especially observations of a critical nature. Be forewarned that anything sent to **YAWN** may be considered for inclusion in a future issue without specific prior notification. Submissions are welcome and encouraged. It is the policy of **YAWN** not to attribute work, unless the content benefits from such attribution. **YAWN** is a collective, mostly anonymous, effort. Contributors receive 3 copies of the **YAWN** in which their work is used. Monetary donations are requested to help defray the costs of publication. Subscriptions to **YAWN** are available for \$10 for one year. Archive at <http://yawn.detroit.net/>.

## Four Billion People Can't Be Wrong

It is not a matter of realizing the Art Strike, or even building on every level of life everything that hitherto could only be an art strike memory, or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. The Art Strike can only be realized by being suppressed. And in suppressing it with the automatism of an even more passive and hierarchical spectacle, we freeze-dry its contents into something stable, quantifiable, investment worthy, in short, homogeneous.

The Art Strike is not only a commodity but also a symbolic representation of this order, the justification of its concept of reality.

There will be an empty space left by the Art Strike as a comprehensive order binding everything, the social consensus will be destroyed, we will have reached the end of the great history of our common culture. The empty space left by the Art Strike will be occupied by another order, the economy. The ideal of change as value, adopted by our culture, has found its full significance in the Art Strike.

The Art Strike in its honesty, says about itself that in its state of exhaustion it is not able to put forward values. It can only be a description of the situation, the world of exhausted values of our culture. It can only be a quotation of history, a substitute for something that has ceased to exist.

The Art Strike opposes the logical way of mind which has led to this cultural devastation. The Art Strike will be a resounding stroke of the gong, its ringing will drown out the squawks of the malingerers, their strained voices will fade into thin air.

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?  
[ASAC-CA 1988]

## Artist Sucks

Most of Richard Serra's commentary in "Artists have rights to their work" (*Des Moines Sunday Register*, October 29, 1989, page 1C, 3C) is irrelevant, because Serra's predicament is not a First Amendment issue. Serra has every right to reconstruct his razed work "Tilted Arc" using his own resources. The issue is whether the government has the right to correct its mistakes or not. **YAWN** believes that it does.

When art participates in culture as a commodity, as it now does, it should expect no less than to be treated as such. Goebbel's famous quip "when I hear the word 'culture' I reach for my revolver" is aptly rephrased as "when I hear the word 'culture' I reach for my checkbook". Serra sold "Tilted Arc" to the US Government. "Art" was the object of a real estate transaction. It was decided that the property lacked the value it was originally thought to have. The property was removed. It is very simple. And absolutely consistent with the culture in which we live.

Serra's egotistical bellyaching does nothing to change the facts of the case. He created a work of limited cultural value. The public, fed up with the irrelevance of contemporary art, not to mention its manifest hostility toward them, finally rebelled, and the work "Tilted Arc" was quite properly removed.

The real issue is whether or not art has the responsibility to address the concerns of its culture. Modernist and Postmodernist art, for the bulk of this century, has been quite smug in its insular self-referentiality and cynical profiteering. This art really only appeals to other artists, and their ancillary functionaries—critics, curators, and collectors. They see art as an investment for realizing a profit, while simultaneously enhancing their social status. At the same time, they create and foster the myth that "Art" and the "Artist" are wellsprings of special knowledge. **YAWN** rejects this model as elitist and self-serving.

**To the person who offered a critique of YAWN #5 by scribbling on a copy that was publicly posted: "This degrades women. Down with YAWN!"**: You sexist bigot! The battle against degradation must proceed upon all fronts simultaneously. To see this image as primarily degrading to women is to miss that, if it degrades, then it also degrades caucasians, blondes, art majors, people who wear glasses, and human beings in general. When you fragment your reality into smaller "political issues", you only make it easier for those in control to control you. **YAWN** refuses to toe the line of your dogmatic, outmoded, snotty feminism.

## Letters from Our Readers

Dear **YAWN**,

...here's some info pertaining to the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art's 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, "Neoists and Stewart Home are only using Art Strike to call attention to itself." He concluded, "Art Strike will fail!" I counted "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 *thing*, 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 measley art books with no thanks from anyone while the people who put out "Art Strike" pamphlets and manifestoes are going to go *right on* doing it, keeping right on going with *their conceptual art project!* Forget it!

San Francisco, California

**YAWN** says: The Art Strike is not seen by this instigator as a collective [in]action having rules-to-be-broken. 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. This may take as many forms as there are participants.

The Art Strike will fail for many reasons, not the least of which is that it's a bad idea. As a bad idea, its chief objective is the collective rethinking of the role of art in our culture. It is a constructive response to the hypocritical smugness with which most artists treat the public.

Life during the Art Strike should be more creative, not less. As we will no longer have art to fall back on to structure our leisure, we will need to structure it ourselves. This will demand conscientious discipline and awareness of the reality of our surroundings. The rejection of hierarchically imposed collective illusions is merely a first step.

# ART STRIKE

Karen Eliot Interviewed by Scott MacLeod (1989)

*Karen Eliot is not a specific, or identifiable, human being. It is a name adopted by a variety of cultural workers at various times in order to carry through tasks related to building up a body of work ascribed to 'Karen Eliot'. One of the purposes of many different individuals using the same name is to highlight the problems thrown up by the various mental sets pertaining to identity, individuality, originality, value and truth. 'Anybody' can use the name Karen Eliot but the extent to which it is used is limited by the fact that 'multiple name concepts' are neither widely known nor understood. Since the Karen Eliot project was launched in 1985 (at the same time as the proposal for the 1990 to 1993 Art Strike), around one hundred individuals have operated within the parameters of the 'identity/context'. Considering the difficulties involved in persuading anyone to 'invest' their time in something which is unlikely to bring them much 'personal reward' (in terms of cultural recognition, etc.) this number is not without significance.*

**Scott MacLeod:** Tell me about Art Strike.

**Karen Eliot:** The premise is that an Art Strike should be held from January 1st, 1990 to January 1st, 1993. The strike will force the closure of galleries, 'modern' art museums, agencies, 'alternative' art spaces, periodicals, theaters, art schools, etc. All the educational, distributional, and critical mechanisms by which art both as an ideology and as a commodity is propagated.

**SM:** What do your artist friends think of this?

**KE:** Their reactions are a mirror image of the response we got to an earlier project—the Festival of Plagiarism. With the Festival, everyone was initially confused about the relationship between plagiarism and what they were doing. Then they got very excited by the idea and saw lots of possibilities in it. With the Art Strike, most people's initial response is favorable, it's only a bit later that fundamental disagreements arise.

**SM:** So you think the use of the word 'strike' could be responsible for the initial enthusiasm?

**KE:** Yes I do. The term has certain connotations in England which I don't think it has here (i.e. in the United States); there's a very different experience and perception of labor movements in Europe.

**SM:** Was there a conscious decision to use the term 'strike' which was based on those connotations?

**KE:** A conscious decision? Gustav Metzger used the term 'Art Strike' in 1974. He called for a strike between 1977 and 1980, so there's a historical precedent. However there are significant differences between that earlier Art Strike and our own; Metzger's activity was primarily directed towards destroying those institutions, commercial galleries and so on, which appeared to him to have an adverse effect on artistic production. It was set up in the classic hero/villain model. Which might

account for the difficulties Metzger had attracting support for the strike. In fact, no one joined him!

**SM:** It must have been, must be, hard to convince artists or anyone else that going on strike is a good idea.

**KE:** Well, the Art Strike is not a good idea. It's a bad idea from the point of view of anyone trying to make a career out of art. It's a bad idea from many perspectives, and that does make things a bit more difficult; even though our aims in organizing an Art Strike are completely different from Metzger's. We're addressing a far broader range of issues than Metzger and unlike him we don't necessarily expect the mechanics of a strike to operate in the same way within the realm of culture as they would in the economic sphere. Rather than attempting to disrupt and destroy those institutions which affect production and distribution of art products, the 1990 Art Strike is principally focused on the role of the artist. On how the artist defines her or his identity, on how that identity affects the artist's ability to engage with the surrounding culture.

**SM:** So, Art Strike is a bad idea and it's not really what it says it is, it's not really a strike against the gallery system or the commodity system.

**KE:** We've had endless discussions about the appropriateness of the term 'strike', about its efficacy in this situation. At one time we tried to change the name to 'Refusal of Creativity' but this phrase just didn't catch on. We found that people responded to the term 'Art Strike' because it's confrontational and brings together ideas from what are traditionally considered to be two autonomous realms—the economic and cultural. In the syndicalist tradition, which has had an influence on our thinking, the strike is ultimately the means of revolution—far more is at issue than a simple hourly-wage increase.

As far as we're concerned, the Art Strike is a strike. It's a denial of product and a denial of labor. Like the syndicalist general strike, the issues being discussed range from the economic to those of revolution and self-determination. We're trying to achieve large-scale change in our relationships with what the bourgeois art establishment alleges are 'esthetic' objects and relationships. We decided to describe our activities as a strike to make our political, economic and moral motivations explicit. And we hope the use of this term will encourage active rather than passive engagement with the issues.

**SM:** And yet you've said the Art Strike is a bad idea.

**KE:** It probably is a bad idea if one conceives of it as taking the shape of the classic proletarian strike within the economic sphere, and for several reasons. If one were naive enough to attempt to disable certain institutionalized forms of commodity culture through the organization of artists along trade union lines, then one would be bound to fail

because the vast majority of artists would scab. Artists typically view themselves as isolated producers who are in competition with each other; they lack any sense of the solidarity and self-interest upon which successful strikes are built. And even if all the artists in the world did withhold labor for three years, or even ten or twenty years, such a strike might still fail to have much impact within the economic, or even cultural, sphere. The denial of product will not change the fact that there are those who have excess money and want to invest it in something which will realize a profit and simultaneously enhance their status. As long as capitalism survives there will always be entrepreneurial middle-men and hangers-on who seek to increase their status and/or wealth by playing the appropriate roles within a culture of acquisition. Art is a product which, if withheld, can easily be replaced by classic cars, artificial sex partners and the like.

However I'm not trying to suggest that art is a mere appendage of economics. Anyone with half a brain can see that there is a dynamic interaction between culture, economics and politics. All I'm saying is that there are an almost infinite variety of substitutes for the ideological and economic functions with which art services capitalist society. The whole point about the 1990 Art Strike is that it is a means of intensifying the class struggle within the cultural, economic and political spheres. If the Art Strike succeeds in demoralizing a cross section of the bourgeois class then it will have succeeded.

**SM:** Are you suggesting that artists form a faction within the bourgeois class and that you're hoping to demoralize them?

**KE:** Yes, artists are one group our activities are intended to demoralize. There's an attitude among artists that they're in touch with a higher discourse, a meta-ethics if you will, which frames their activities within different ethical standards than those of other people. The National Socialist Party in Germany became successful partly as a result of encouraging this kind of attitude. So what we're trying to do with the Art Strike is call into question this notion which artists hold, that they are somehow exempt from the responsibilities of engagement with the issues of their own culture. The attitude that artists are engaged in a pursuit which is somehow separate from other human activities. This attitude creates an ideological justification for hierarchical divisions between human beings. It will be difficult to convince art 'producers' to take an objective look at their own attitudes and activities but this is no reason to be pessimistic about our chances of significant success; black propaganda might well prove sufficient to demoralize a sizeable proportion of artists to the extent that they will abandon their present cultural pursuits.

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