

Reprinted from the *Village Voice*, November 14, 1989

## 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, theaters, art schools &c., to cease all operations for the same period.” While it’s unlikely that the luxury market called art will collapse from lack of product early next years, 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 travelers 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, organizes conferences, and teaches occasionally at London Polytechnic—all of which activities he will cease. For three years, he plans to sell his labor “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 labor, 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 laborers 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 by the Maryland Institute of Art and Baltimore art openings, and has disseminated 10,000 strike fliers. 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 Artist’s Television Access Gallery to inaugurate the strike.

Recently, the editors of *Photostatic*, a marginal art magazine out of 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 in a convent. “It’s not important to have hundreds of people stop work,” he says,

“but to disturb and demoralize those who endorse the system of artistic production and distribution.”

No well-known artists have aligned themselves with the strike, and cultural life 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 canceling their personæ 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 *épater 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

REMEMBER THOSE  
WHO CAN  
NOT SPEAK  
  
ART STRIKE  
  
1990 - 1993  
  
IRISH ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEE  
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# SFAI

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 12/13/89

TO ALL STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND FRIENDS OF SFAI

Re: Observance of the International Artists Strike

At the last meeting of the board of trustees it was decided, by a vote of 28 to 8, with 2 abstentions, that SFAI, with its tradition of commitment to the fine arts, freedom of expression, and social justice, has an inescapable ethical obligation to observe the Art Strike.

Moreover, it is felt by the majority of the board that during the Reagan/Bush years the repression of the poor, women, gays, people of color and of the disenfranchised groups by the ruling class has intensified to such a point that, particularly in light of recent developments in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the United States of America can now fairly be called the most repressive industrialized nation in the world, and though the Art Strike is international, American artists, for so long participants in this destructive culture --truly the road to hell is paved with good intentions!-- have a special obligations to step back, be quiet, and listen to the voices of the people they have for so long presumed to represent.

As arts administrators, patrons of the arts, and artists ourselves, we confess that we cannot predict the results of our withdrawal. We only know that we cannot go on as we have been, pursuing our own careers, promoting a circumscribed view of self-expression as the province of an elite group of "talented" individuals, and believing that the practise of art is virtuous in itself.

Therefore, beginning January 1st, 1990, all artmaking at SFAI will cease for a period of three years. However, we will not close our doors. The premises of the art institute will be made available to all as a center for direct democracy. What happens then is up to you.

Faculty will continue to draw their salaries as long as funds are available. All available financial aid will be divided equally among the currently registered students.

We fully expect that the adventure of the next three years will be among the most challenging and profoundly creative experiences of our lives; we welcome you as companions and equals; and we look forward to getting to know you for the first time.

Sincerely yours,  
Board of Trustees  
SFAI