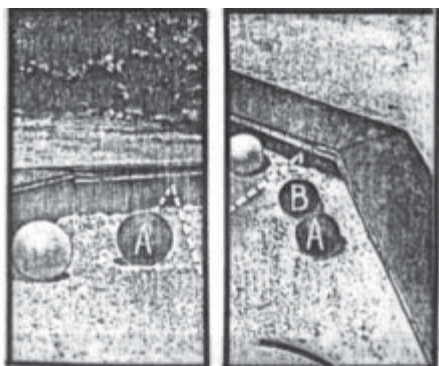


YAWN is a sporadic communiqué which seeks to provide a critical look at our culture in all its manifestations. We welcome responses from readers, especially observations of a critical nature. Be forewarned that anything sent may be considered for inclusion in a future issue without specific prior notification. Submissions are welcome and encouraged. It is our policy not to attribute work, unless the content benefits from such attribution. **YAWN** is a collective, mostly anonymous, effort. Contributors receive a copy of the **YAWN** in which their work is used. Monetary donations are requested to help defray the costs of publication. Subscriptions are available for \$10 (cash or unused stamps) for 25 issues. Archive at <http://yawn.detritus.net/>.

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 3 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 a cute notion that *should* have been disposed of, but wasn't. And so we will be doing without the work of avowed 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 realization, which can be cultivated, wherein one can calculate the effect of Good that 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. The medicine we've been collectively brewing isn't *strong* enough yet. 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 destabilize a Goodness."

With these words beyond 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 *The 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 organized 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 organizers 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 the 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 organized 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; an attempt to demoralize 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 organize. 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 organization 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 “metaphysical” 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, or 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 fulfill 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 favor of the idea but against it. All energy would be turned against it. The prevailing mood would be characterized 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 Krakow 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 “postmodernism” 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 program the idea that artists whose art was turned against serious culture and elite institutions should expand their activity. Also other publications emphasized 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 the 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 the 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 program 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 program. 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 issue 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 realized at all that in 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 a *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 standardizing of all opinions according to the model of totalitarianism.

We can also say that we have to face the problem of the 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. [Géza Perneczky

Report from the Anti-Art Festival

Theatre of Sorts instigated an Anti-Art Festival, held in Cleveland on March 31st of this year. This event was inspired by the Art Strike propaganda I had been handed over a year ago, so therefore I had been thinking about Art Strike and its implications for quite some time. The Anti-Art Festival was an attempt to put some of those thoughts into action. The concept was to set up a performance/exhibit situation upon non-hierarchical lines. There would be no panel of distinguished judges to accept or reject anyone's work. All that had to be done was sign up by a deadline. Announcements of the event were sent forth resulting in 16 various performance acts committing themselves to the event. In addition, anyone who wanted to exhibit or distribute their work in whatever media was invited to simply show up that night.

One of the most interesting (for me) aspects of Art Strike is the concept of not doing "art," because there is the essential question: just what is art and what is not art? By eliminating curators of this event, it was left up to the individual to decide what was not art and then present it for others. Would the audience/viewers agree or disagree as to whether what they were experiencing was not art? My hope was that such an event would lead to some lively discussion and a sharing of a whole spectrum of ideas and viewpoints. The anti-art festival was not limited to art-strikers, for I have met many people who oppose Art Strike or support some of its tenets, and limiting the event in any way would be an act of censorship.

Another aspect of the festival was to see how little money could be spent. Many people in the arts community are currently up in arms about the stranglehold put on the National Endowment for the Arts. My own personal feelings about government funding are that it 1) is best to learn to do without government funding; 2) leads to dependency and ultimately influences choices in what it produced (one is not likely to take risks if that will lead to loss of funds); and 3) created unfair competition between various groups and individuals since the decision as to who gets the money is left up to bureaucrats who will fund the established and conventional art groups before anything new and innovative. I spent about \$50 on publicity, postage and long-distance phone calls. The Artchoke was made available for \$85 to cover cost of rent and cleaning, and Kevin Williams, the manager of that space, was kind enough to take a risk and let us pay after the box office receipts were in. In addition, a sound system and sound man were found for an amazingly low \$25 for that night. Admission was \$3, this being my estimate as to the cheapest price that would still cover expenses along with the hope that we would draw at least 50 paying customers. Any additional money taken in at the door would be given to the Northeast Ohio Task Force on AIDS so that any profit would benefit a worthy cause.

We pulled in \$145 at the door. This is not a multiple of three as there were people who showed up with less than \$3 in pocket and they were asked to

contribute what they could. The actual number of people in attendance was undoubtedly twice the amount who actually paid to get in and that includes all the performers and exhibitors,

and the various people who volunteered as stage crew throughout the evening. My estimate is that at one point or another there were about 100 people involved in the event. At any rate, I was able to pay Kevin the sound man. I gave the rest of the "profits" to the AIDS task force and Theatre of Sorts absorbed the publicity expenses, which since the money had long since been spent did not seem like any real big loss!

My critique of this event centers upon its duration. It was quite long: doors opened for viewing at 6 p.m., an art trial began at 7:00, a gay wedding took place at 7:30 and then the performances began at 8. Since I had no idea what the response would be, I had put no time limit on any of the performances, hoping that it would somehow all work out. Most people signed up for 15 to 20 minutes worth of time, though some took a half hour. In addition, two people called me after the deadline and had good reasons as to why they hadn't contacted me sooner. Softie that I am, I said that they could go on at the end of the evening. For the order of the rest of the acts—I drew names out of a hat and that was the performance schedule. The last performance was finished by 1 a.m. and so it was an endurance test of sorts for those who stuck around until the end. If I were to do this event again, I would wait until the deadline, count up the number of acts then divide the time equally among them. Then if three people had signed up, they'd each get an hour. If 50 people had signed up? I probably would have fainted from amazement, then realized that something this popular should go on for an entire week, gone for radio and TV advertising and made a bundle of money!

Now, as to the work presented, well, I overheard a number of discussions as to whether any particular act was art or not. I am not going to offer a critique. In my opinion, there are far too many art critiques in the world already. And as for anti-art critiques, I am inviting all the participants to share their opinions in the next issues of my zine, *The Dumpster Times*. I will say that my impression of the evening was that it was not boring, that people were engaged in lively discourse throughout the night, and that it was a success in at least one area—it is very possible to have a performance or exhibition without government or corporate funding and in fact for very little money whatsoever. Therefore, I would encourage people to consider stealing this event, or adapting it and making it better.

[Theatre of Sorts, Cleveland]

THEATRE
OF
SORTS



A Personal Statement by Philippe Billé

I would like to criticize several points in this Art Strike (1990–1993) project. First, I disagree with some of the opinions formulated in its promoter's texts. For example, I do not believe that various forms of mischievousness, 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 would help us to bear, depend on our economic organization; nor that it is unjust to designate with a particular word: "artist," those who manifest certain particular talents; nor that it is deplorable the fact 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 it often appears in the activity of the profession artists and of the apprentices who aim at becoming so).

Nevertheless, there is without doubt much to deplore, and so to criticize, in the present state of arts, culture and civilization: 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 in last June, at my 33rd birthday, that I wanted to "retire" as an artist, I accept 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, so as various letters of shabby canvassing; by studying the evolution of the debates raised in the American, free, and anonymous newsletter YAWN. One will allege against me that this is too easy. This is partly right. And then?

[Translated by Ph. Billé; reprinted from *Lettre Documentaire*, Bordeaux, December 1989]

The Strike Within a Strike

Auden once wrote, *Learn their logic, but notice/How its subtlety betrays/Their enormous simple grief*. The logic of an “art strike” both helps us notice “their” logic and shows us that “we” have learned it all too well.

“Their” logic is more fundamentally an orienting and spatial feeling, and in that way it is instrumental: it is a form of defense in which “I” am “in here” and you are “out there” and “a chair” is to my “left.” I know where everything is, so I’m okay over here. There might be other possible ways to conceptualize feelings about being where you are; this particular thought-protection is a bit anxious about where we all are and who is too close to whom.

Inside/outside is of course part of a whole chain of dualisms which rest on the fundamental switch (the on/off) of Aristotle’s logic: A cannot be both A and not-A at the same time. Either/or. The enormous simple grief Auden mentions is too serious to trivialize by chatting about it but consider one bit of Western sorrow, that feeling you see in everyone’s face but which no one ever talks about, as caused by this continual sorting: inside me/outside me. Thus, before everything else, distance.

This problem of instrumental reason is the familiar target of critiques by a whole tradition of European writers from Nietzsche onward; Habermas sums up their point this way: “reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality.” That is, reason, which liberates us from our spiritual tradition (infinitely corruptible and oppressive, as Western history continues to demonstrate) also confines us in a dry and loveless self-consciousness in which objects and predictable forces act in calculable ways and spirituality is mocked by artists and talk-show hosts alike (a not-so surprising alliance). “Because this regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute transforms the means of consciousness-raising and emancipation into just so many instruments of objectification and control, it fashions for itself an uncanny immunity in the form of a thoroughly concealed domination.” It is so busy exposing the empty claims and phoney forms of exploitation that it creates a pervasive image, a substitute world: a “world” full of things which need to be unmasked and which automatically lose their claim on us once unmasked by reason’s cackle. The world is not only objectified, it is full of shams and cheats only reason can save us from. In this magic “world,” where unmasking is the hocus-pocus, paradise would be a place where everything was finally clear: “the opacity of the iron cage of a reason that has become positive disappears as if in the glittering brightness of a completely transparent crystal palace.”

The art “world” is completely pervaded with this attitude, transfixed as it is by a culture it imagines it can successfully overmaster simply by unmasking it—often enough, this urge to unmask the other is itself a mask for an urge to partake: either to gaze unhampered by a guilty conscience (“I’m collecting images for a thorough critique later so leave me alone”) or to enjoy the apparent rewards it pretends to despise by further hypnotizing an already bored and hypnotized audience. Hey—not only can you look at this too, but it is more cool to look at this than that trash you usually look at and someday it’ll be worth, like...

In such circumstances, to call a “strike” points up many of the unpleasantly tainted (therefore repressed) aspects of “artmaking”: the recognition of consumers as bosses, the expectation of pay, the urge to be part of the system it pretends to criticize and so on.

But to think in this way—that is, to imagine “art” as an objectified product or object or event which I can control and withhold—is to learn their—our—logic all too well. Like all asceticism, it is useful to make one aware of the feeling of the activity: to give up or renounce something is a good way to become conscious of what before might have been merely automatic and habitual. Not only that, to be conscious of the craving as a protection. Against what? This practice is another perhaps less dreamy way of working on the same dilemma addressed by the philosophers since their target is “desire,”

insofar as by the term “desire” we can identify not the pleasure in something really occurring here and now but rather the imaginary enjoyment of something in an imaginary time (the future or the past). Imaginary pleasure taken in some imaginary time is nothing but a substitute for and an evasion of the life that might really exist (but floats past unrealized) during the time of the illusion. And in this culture the individual’s stock of pleasure-images is pervaded by advertising of one form or another, all of which requires an unrealistic income in order to be realized, as well as a brand new imaginary ego chock-full of essentially bizarre but well respected qualities like dishonesty, toadyism, hard-heartedness, and other sociopathic attributes. It’s no wonder the face of a daydreamer is so often grim or sad.

It is a good idea not to be too caught up in the idea that some unmasking project of “ours” means we have once and for all found a place of moral elevation. And safety: they, the deluded, are over there, we are here. Idea=idea. As the writer they used to think was called Dionysius (now called Pseudo-Dionysius) put it: “God hates ideas.” Obviously, since thinking is just something we do so as to have opinions among our possessions, an activity not to be confused with meaning, which is something to be lived, somehow, if possible, tentatively and stubbornly or maybe patiently (how should I know?) Meister Eckhart said, “God acts without instrumentality and without ideas. And the freer you are from ideas the more sensitive you are to inward action.”

“Art” is not a separate “thing” one chooses to do or not do but a form of “inward action” if you like which you naturally express or communicate in some way. A disciplined attention to that is simply a more disciplined attention to one’s existence. In a way, to think of it as “art” and get things for it is already the result of a previous art strike or tantrum of some sort. The Greek term “hecatomb” for example doesn’t mean the sacrifice of one hundred oxen, it means that by this magical act I will *get* a hundred oxen from the gods in return. Who did the bargaining there, we wonder, and is he still available?

Joseph Beuys in an interview was asked about the series of Christian images he pursued for a time and his response was that he gradually realized that such traditional motifs were already achieved and not what he himself needed to do; there follows a long mysterious discussion of the need to suffer “this process of crucifixion and complete incarnation in the material world” before working through to an achieved spirituality. Nietzsche talked about something like this also, of the death of sacred ideas, loss of faith in the old names, and then a movement from the material level of the senses back towards the spiritual. “I desire for myself and for all who live... without being tormented by a puritanical conscience, an ever-greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses; indeed we should be grateful to the senses for their subtlety, plenitude, and power, and offer them in return the best we have in the way of spirit.”

The point is that “art” is already there in the way one sees or listens to or moves across the world. As we notice or don’t notice something, we are already in the life we are making all the time at a level so fundamental we can’t even be aware of its workings much less try to stop them. We can always offer more in the way of spirit. Or we can reject much of this experience in favor of what might be called art simply by devaluing the former—after all you can’t make a career out of it and nobody gets famous for just going down the street with eyes open, ears open. I approve of “art strike” as a way to annoy ourselves and cut into our sleeping time. But it is also the logic of our shining and heartless utopia that invests in/thinks there is something out there (both holy and laughable) called “art” or as Crazy Kat called it “ott.” The trouble is provocation is an individual matter; for example “spiritual” is an essential term for something—what (the fuck) else to call it, eh?—but it drives me crazy every time I say it so I make myself say it, especially in cool art publications. Pretty soon I’ll try to slip ~~Jesus~~ into one of them (he crossed it out, didn’t he?) because there’s a strike inside the strike. Don’t tell anyone. [Pseudo-Karen Eliot]