

**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/>.

## 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 January 1, 1990, the numbers involved will be so small that the strike is unlikely to force the closure of any galleries or other 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, etc. 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, etc., one which ranks the items to be found within these categories into a hierarchy.

Given the diversity of objects, texts, compositions, etc., 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 what 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 so that we can more effectively 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 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, Re-

pression 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 May 22, 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 would run between 1977 and 1980. The idea was to attack the way in which the art world was organized 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 labor. 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 sup-

**C O N T R I B U T E •**

YAWN cares to make little distinction between its "readers" and its "contributors" as such, and would like to bring about a vigorous interaction among all such participants and cultural workers. In addition, the issues of concern to YAWN are substantially more general than previous output would tend to suggest. That is to say, YAWN is very interested in publically exposing ideas and discussion well beyond what is dealt with in the Art Strike. Culture generally is the target of our collective discourse. The potential is vast. This is all part of an effort on our part to bring about a critique of culture that tests the basic assumptions of those who tacitly support it, even if they do no more than function in it. It is those least challenged of generally made cultural assumptions which demand the most attention. Use your personal experience as a guide. Write down or diagram what comes to mind. Submit it to YAWN as part of the ongoing dialog. YAWN seeks letters, essays, commentaries, cartoons, graphics, and the results of cultural research. Any format, no returns, copy of published work to the participant.

**R E A D •**

**EXPERIENCE**

**The problem with the Art Strike is that the dialog it generates is of no more value than the art it replaces. We**

# don't want to deny the compulsion to create; we want to replace it with the compulsion to think. Credo: Breath-

port, Dordevic abandoned his plan for an International Art Strike.

In Eastern Europe, where cultural work is totally professionalized, 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* 11/19/89). 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 has caused something of a stir in Mail Art and other circles, but we were still lacking an organizational 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 organize an Art Strike Mobilization 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 Mobilization 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 theorizing 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 to not consider themselves to be 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, 12/27/89]

The following is a public message from the Albany Art Strike Action Committee (AASAC):

## Greetings Fellow Citizens!

Flourishes, commendations and general fanfare have been sent up the line to the right honorable Governor Cuomo and Commissioner Egan (OGS) for their courageous and historical participation in the anational Art Strike, currently in effect from 1990-1993.

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 colors and squiggly lines.

Distraction is an art practiced by politicians and power-mongers. It is the prevalent device for seizing and holding power. So long as you are distracted from the basic questions of what life is, and what to do with yours—you remain powerless, alienated from your deepest desires.

Distraction is what art is all about. The statement, "you gotta have art," is accurate only insofar as that without art, the hideous totality that shapes today's social arrangements threatens to become obvious to all. You will find nothing but cHaos and @narchy riding on the crest of such a generalized realization.

As politicians and power-mongers, Governor Cuomo and Commissioner Egan are taking a considerable risk in choosing to participate in the Art Strike. They are, by their action, negating the same power they covet. They are flaunting our boredom in our faces, challenging us to do something about it.

So what are you going to do?

[AASAC]

*"Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should*

*furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns."*

*Noam Chomsky, from Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies, 1989: South End Press, Boston, p. 48*

# ing is necessary. Art is a luxury. Thought is desirable. How can you create when there is so much else to do?

## Cultural Workers in Support of YAWN

ASAC (United Kingdom), BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, England  
Lang Thompson, P.O. Box 49604, Atlanta GA 30359  
Albany ASAC (AASAC), P.O. Box 2265, Albany NY 12220  
Woodenshoe Books/Karen Eliot, 112 S 20th St, Philadelphia PA 14103  
Lettre Documentaire, B.P. 249, 33012 Bordeaux Cedex France

