

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. 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/>.

The Blunting of the Cutting Edge

Nothing speaks more clearly of the entertainment plutocracy's "institutional avant-garde" than their own public relations puffery. The Philip Morris Co. Inc., recently ran a full-color two-page advertisement on the inside cover of *Harper's Magazine* for the "Next Wave Festival." It read, in part:

THIS IS ART?

You betcha! This is the Next Wave Festival. The next frontier of the visual and performing arts.

This is a window to Tomorrow. Dazzling. Exhilarating. Controversial. Perhaps even incendiary. (Has there ever been a significant new movement in the arts that hasn't driven tradition- alists stark, staring mad?)...

If the Next Wave Festival should start minds ricocheting at new angles...then there will be quiet rejoicing at all the Philip Morris companies, whose people light creative fires in many fields, in Enterprise as well as the Arts.

AT&T, the sponsors of the recent Robert Longo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, took out big ads in the *Chicago Tribune* to slaver over their chosen avatar of the avant-garde in remarkably similar terms:

Art from the dark side? Or the cutting edge of creation?...

The spectacular art of Robert Longo is causing debate and making viewers stand back and take notice. Of the power with which he brings together drawing, painting, sculpture, music, and video. Of the impact with which he challenges complacency. And of the audacity with which he assaults our senses.

For 50 years, we at AT&T have made it our business to put artists and audiences together. Often the result is applause. Sometimes gasps. Always spirited communication. And communication, after all, has been our business for more than a century.

These notices, with their slick postmodern graphics and their adman's prose, provide us with a startlingly apt opportunity to renew **YAWN's** battle with the false avant-garde of contemporary art. On the surface, the ostentatious public homage paid by certain corporations to "Next Wave," the "cutting edge," and "audacity" in art seems very peculiar. Art and business are ancient enemies, or pretend to be, anyway. For years avant-

gardists have made careers out of simple schemes for shocking the bourgeoisie, the benighted Babbits of the provincial cities.

But in 1990, as these conspicuous announcements demonstrate, corporate America has few qualms about endorsing most major-league art, since it so thoroughly mirrors their own cultural program. For all their talk about "windows to tomorrow," there is certainly nothing more audacious about these vanguardists than, say, commercials for MTV or perfume or shoes. This art is not adversarial; it's not even "alternative." It is, though, openly and utterly given over to P.R. experimentation, to the imperative of novelty and the other perennial themes of consumerist culture. The works promoted here are consumer products; from their countless facile attempts to startle, to the trendiness which supports their market value, to the easy alliances they have found with advertising campaigns. These days both artists and admen mouth standard pæans to the New, and obligatory slights of those who fail to keep up with the industry's latest models, and both cooperate in a transparent attempt to humanize certain loathsome corporations.

Convinced as firmly as ever that the taste of our time has been determined by the imperatives of the Culture Industry, **YAWN** calls upon artists and writers to recognize the extent to which their craft has been appropriated by plutocracy for its own uses. The cult of the new that responds so sneeringly from these ads is merely a smoke screen for the hegemony of planned obsolescence; the effort to shock simply a tool for the generation of markets; and the schemes of intentional obfuscation a shameful surrender to the powers which would render art toothless. The art of the "Next Wave" is a businessman's art; its techniques that of the P.R.-man. By deploying the once-radical concept of "the avant-garde" and "the shocking," business culture has eliminated the once-vital artistic opposition to its consumerist project.

In 1990 "avant-garde" means something closer to being the first on the block to wear a Batman T-shirt than it does to inventing a truly meaningful, penetrating representational (or abstract) technique. And shocking the bourgeoisie was never much of an artistic program in the first place. It's just as shallow as ever, only today—with the sanctifying cultural models of the "Next

Wave Exhibit" to guide them—it's the bourgeoisie who go through an endless pantomime of shocking one another. Nobody is truly shocked anymore; the entire apparatus of shockery persists only because the shocking has been so profitably appropriated and fetishized: the perpetual scramble for the latest model has been blessed by a coalition of artists and admen, and the purchasing public is only too willing to buy and buy and buy as much art and cigarettes and clothing and cars and hi-fis as they can, provided their new stuff will vex their less up-to-date neighbor.

In the last century the marriage of business and art has produced a vast pan-media celebration of the folkways of Capitalism; an Official Style that subverts opposition by simulating rebellion; a dignified kitsch that gives apathy a sophisticated façade. Its works are displayed on the slick pages of almost every national magazine as well as in the nation's trendiest galleries. The alliance of commerce and culture has convinced the booboisie of the urbanity of conformity more effectively than even the slickest of 1950s commercials. And, if their complacent vanguardism goes unchallenged, capital will have created a new and improved acquisitive machine that eliminates or co-opts its intellectual opponents like never before.

As Big Art draws bigger and bigger sums, the fundamental assumptions of the avant-garde are reduced to meaninglessness. The artist loses his crucial social position and becomes a more or less conscious propagandist for planned obsolescence; a corporate illustrator, decorator, or copy-writer.

And as literature becomes mired in precious sloughs of irony and textuality, these debasements lose their shame. Our writers veer unflinchingly away from the central aesthetic questions of our time, opting instead to invent facile plays for hipness than can be easily sold on Madison Avenue. And the whole consumerist project itself, the central motive force and organizing theme of our age, becomes unjudgeable amid the fogs of "undecidability" they have called down upon themselves. Impotent, powerless, fearful of forthright speech lest they privilege one discourse over another, they have left the world open to exploitation, manipulation, and control by those who *know* what they want: Wall Street, and **YAWN**.

In a time when the "cutting edge" has become a powerful tool for mediocrization, we proudly rededicate ourselves to its blunting. In an age when the Hollywood glamor of the "avant-garde" has long since overtaken its aesthetic usefulness, we happily devise new tactics to send it scurrying in disarray. [Plaster Cramp Press

Why Bother with Propaganda?

The Art Strike asserts that art is bourgeois and elitist. You only have to compare the coverage in the tabloids and the “quality” papers in terms only of the square centimeters devoted to its propagation to reveal the class emphasis of something that apologists claim to have universal value.

When the artists and administrators choose to make work “accessible” it is in the hallowed chambers of the secular cathedrals, the gallery and museum. People are ushered in to pay their respects to the relics, the dead skin of the humanist saints.

Artists of course lead the way, blazing new trails, boldly decorating where no one could be bothered before. This seeps down to us lesser mortals in the form of exciting new adverts, repackaged goodies and novelty philosophies readily bowdlerized by the color supplement hacks.

The insistence on metaphor and allusion to placing in the art historical context make it a coded world as specialistic and mystifying as stamp collecting.

Commodification is, if not an inevitability, financially useful. Art objects are the next step up the ladder from executive toys. Intellectual arguments surrounding work become interesting accessories. Neo-expressionism competes with Minimalism for the market share in much the same way as Acid House does with Techno. The most trite examples of this tendency are companies like Hunter and Philip Morris; the one a bomb manufacturer, the other a tobacco corporation; both arts sponsors, and both responsible for thousands of deaths, maybe attempting a little expiation by applying a philanthropic gloss to their façades.

Art creates a false sense of space, an illusionary sanctuary where integrity and intellectual freedom flourish untainted by the coarser aspects of life. From this radical nature reserve artists feel that they, when conscience dictates, are able to make forays into social and political activity. The activist artist is always more interested in success within the art sphere rather than a re-alignment of society where our

stolen creativity is repossessed. A recent particularly crass instance of this is the US artist who painstakingly reconstructed a shanty town in a gallery.

Precisely because of the free reign that they feel they have been allowed, artists are able to fine-tune the order of appearances. In this way artists, as other professional intellectuals, become valuable technicians of dominant culture.

Whatever doesn't kill power is killed by it. This is as true for paintings of the reproductive organs of certain plants nicely arranged in a vase as for self-consciously critical work.

There are several possible responses:

To produce art in a strictly formal way. Refine it to a craft of technical, aesthetic and mathematical precision. The old cliché of art for art's sake, and why not? The problem only occurs when the structure of society detaches the by-product of an individual period of creativity, maybe with the artist's connivance, and institutes it as a sterile husk, a coinage.

To subvert its supposed transcendence from within by producing superficial work in the hope that art might implode under the immense density of its own meaninglessness. In this way a lot of self-importantly named Post-modernist art simply reels out knowingly bad jokes. But you can only play about with the pieces of shit for so long.

Others have tried to widen the boundaries of art to achieve the aestheticization of all life. Instead of turning inwards, thrust it out. This can be the highly romantic view put forward by Oscar Wilde or the Surrealists. It can also end up with the nice looking flat roofs of Corbusier that just happen to leak like sieves, or result in the missionary zeal of the community artist, rushing around worried that the vast majority have always been on art strike, desperate to introduce us to the delights of arty-farty vicarious experience. Everyone grins themselves silly when they've got a multimedia arts complex.

To an extent this avoids the issue. By defining everything as art the word loses any currency. (Which is probably a good idea.)

We live in the most highly aestheticized point in history; adverts, TV, music, everything

redesigned and repackaged with rabid ferocity. Muzak is the creation of a complete aestheticism. Alone it is not enough. To expand out into life effectively it must be part of a broader onslaught, ideological and economic as well as cultural. That's where the real fun begins.

Silence—the position of the Art Strike. This is possibly the worst, most incoherent response. When we go to bed, cook or laugh, do we do so for capital? Although we are at present doing so in a society where the major benefactors are bastards, to credit them with complete control, accidental or not, is paranoid conspiracy theory. To talk of your existence merely in terms of strategy is to deny the most important and revolutionary impulse—pleasure.

On a level of mundane practicality the only people who go on strike are probably pretty decent anyway. (It would be great to get the pop star artist to shut up for awhile though.) To disarm ourselves of methods of struggle/creativity is doing the recuperator's job for them. Capitalism would of course be different, but would it be any better if nothing had ever been said against it? The strikers are very vocal in exactly why they choose to produce this art of silence.

The Art Strike has been claimed as a good “propaganda act.” Why bother? I am only interested in a sustained period of real life—and will not exist as a theatrical symbol. Symbolic acts rely entirely on the media coverage given to them as opposed to real acts which have a direct impact. In this aspect the strike becomes ultra-leftist posture politics. A holier-than-thou pose rather than the arty-farty one.

The most interesting idea to arise in support of the Art Strike is a calling into question the role of “artist” or “politico.” Presumably the people who define themselves into these categories are making an honest attempt at a reaction to society. The trouble comes when they see themselves only in these terms. The reaction becomes a self-policed act of conformity. You still refer to yourself as “artist” if you make a point of desisting from the practice known as “art” for a certain period of time. It remains a defined role, albeit negative.

Surely it is common sense to avoid this adoption of stereotypes, but to impose another on top makes an equal contradiction.

The voluntary shifting of roles can be fun, allowing for play, but then why only three years? And why do people have to do it at the same time? I can imagine the Art Strike Action Committees becoming self-help groups for those with cultural cold turkey.

Silence = death, not just for AIDS. Renunciation of creativity is a tactic of despair, not even that but the abandonment of any tactic whatsoever.

[Leisure

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ASAC (Iowa), P.O. Box 49, Iowa City IA 52244

AASAC (Albany), P.O. Box 2265, Albany NY 12220

Plaster Cramp Press, P.O. Box 5975, Chicago IL 60680

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