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Art Strike Interview:

Tony Lowes Interviewed by Gerry Ryan, Irish Radio, November 19, 1989

GR: Good morning, Tony.

TL: Good morning, Gerry.

GR: Now, can you take us back to a few months ago when you were on to us first. Explain what the global art strike is or what it will be and what the objectives of this exercise are.

TL: Well, I think you can take it in on three different levels, Gerry. The first one would be the literal level that you are talking about, where you might have pickets outside the Louvre in Paris. The next level you can take it on, which a lot of people do, is what we call the etymological argument. That means that we're actually just talking about the word art itself. As we change the name of our activity then we can go on doing it. So political art doesn't count because it's different, and performance art isn't really art because it's street art, or somebody's art isn't really art and they can go on doing it because they don't use the gallery system. The etymological argument is the one I call the cop-out argument. I don't think that get us very far. And then there's a third level. It's what they call the utopian, the poetic level. That's the idea that if just one man goes on strike, if the idea is right, and the time is right this single act will create little ripples that could ultimately grow and grow until they could bring down the walls of the Pentagon itself.

GR: What is the object of the exercise?

TL: What we are trying to do is to get people to think about the position that art has taken in our society.

GR: And by art you're generally referring to hangs, stands, falls, sits, or slides in a gallery, I think, aren't you?

TL: I think that's the easiest way to start with it, certainly. That's a very clearly identifiable territory. And that's the territory where you end up with a self-perpetuating elite who are declaring what art is.

GR: You don't like these guys too much, sure you don't.

TL: Oh no, it's nothing like that Gerry, not at all. I was an artist myself for years.

GR: You don't really like what they're trying to foist on the public?

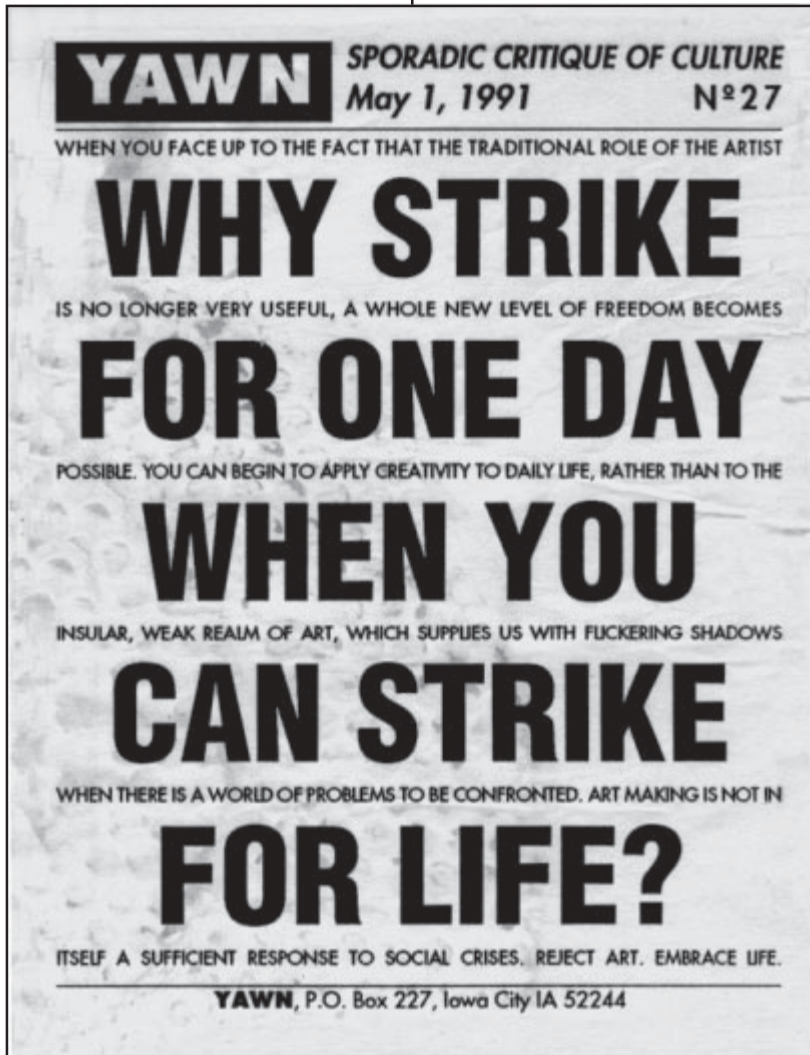
TL: It's not even so much that. It's just that I think we have all grown to accept that art has even taken over from religion in our lives. The *[over*

On May 1, 1991, students at the University of Iowa School of Art and Art History held a one-hour rally, which they called an "Art Strike." Their purpose in doing this was to protest funding cuts that would reduce the number of teaching assistantships available, and therefore reduce the number of sections available to students in a number of courses. These cuts would also affect the material quality of some courses offered by forestalling indefinitely purchases of new equipment, as well as reducing the overall resources available to teaching.

YAWN staged an infiltration of the event by passing out copies of the leaflet reproduced here. Although YAWN is not opposed to the activists tactics of the students who proposed this "Art Strike," it is felt that something more is needed. We feel that the art academy is already morally and ideologically impoverished through its de facto support of the mechanisms of power that the arts buttress. The academy's role as a manufacturer of roles that art students learn to play, as well as propagator of belief systems that encourage "artists" to be mouthpieces for dominant cultural attitudes, lead us at YAWN to think that the material impoverishment of art schools—and all similar institutions—is in all our best interests.

When art students are no longer nurtured by the sheltering womb of academia and are forced to confront the real, challenging issues at play in contemporary culture, they can begin

to realize a really meaningful mode of production. When art students are cast aside by the institutions that have so long mined them as a resource for constructing the illusion of their own legitimacy, serving in the end only that institution's entrenched agenda of producing widespread alienation and endemic boredom, these students are finally free to chart their own course. When art students refuse their role as the interior decorators of social conscience, distracting our gaze from important problems facing all of us, then we can begin to build. It's about time for this to happen, long after the rest of us have stood up, collected our coats and gone home.



idea that the individual could create something, that we should worship what a man can do, with the concept of genius, with the concept of individuality, maybe this is one of the things that led our world into the state that it's in now.

GR: Oh yes?

TL: Yes, right! If you start taking away the Renaissance idea, or the idea of identity, the idea that one man's separate from another, then you start thinking that perhaps we should start something else instead. We should place perhaps common good there, we should reconsider what we have ended up with.

GR: O.k. right, now I don't mean to be simplistic about this because you're a man of great articulation. You're a man who has obviously thought a lot about this. I'm going to try and make what you're saying simple. Attack me if you want! What you're really saying is that we have elevated a certain section of art, or the expression of art, or the feeling of art, we have elevated it to such a cult level and such a level of idolatry, that it's morally unacceptable. That what we should be really doing, we should be really placing the common interest or as you put it the common good (i.e. everybody's hopes and aspirations, the desire to not be without employment, to have enough food in your belly), you should put that kind of thing up there. And we should worship the conquering of evil in poverty, and hunger, before art.

TL: Absolutely. But I think you can go on with that and say, o.k., if we are going to stick this stuff up on art gallery walls, if we are going to have this art world here, what we are doing at the same time is turning around to another man and saying, look, you're not as good. You're not an artist. You can't expect these things, you don't have these things within you, and that kind of argument is elitist. And that kind of argument leads to all sorts of trouble.

GR: Maybe it's just a fact of life. Maybe this elitist status exists, or maybe these elitist arguments exist and they just are.

TL: They are because everybody agrees with them!

GR: But of course, I'm never going to be able to paint like Michelangelo, never ever going to be able to sculpt something, I couldn't draw a matchstick man. That's a fact of life.

TL: O.k., which is more important to you; the Sistine Chapel or your daughter's food?

GR: My daughter's food.

TL: O.k., now why isn't that true of everyone in the world?

GR: That's a good question.

TL: O.k.

GR: That's a very good question. Yeah.

TL: O.k.

GR: Right, I'm with you.

TL: O.k.

GR: Right, I know what you're talking about. O.k., Tony, how can we in Ireland take part in this Art Strike if we are moved to do so?

TL: Well, we can try and reach the artists first of all, I think. Because they are actually decent people, almost all of them got into art because they believed they could do something good. And we are now stuck in a situation where they aren't and we aren't and if we can reach that, and if we can get the word around that there is an alternative way to look at things, then we can start the business. But at the moment my problem is reaching the artists. And if there are any of them out there who would like information about this, I wish they would get in touch with me.

GR: Now, you have an Art Strike Hotline?

TL: I have a 24-hour-a-day Art Strike Hotline. It's 027-73025.

GR: Now, let us suppose that your sentiments are received by sympathetic ears this morning, in some quarters. People are going to turn around to you and say, hold on a second, does this mean the obliteration of art? Art is important, it is a very necessary outlet. It's an important expression of mankind's spirit. Surely we're not going to destroy this entirely?

TL: We're not going about destroying anything, as far as I'm concerned. No, I entirely agree with that. I think one of the misconceptions is when people say, o.k. you're going on an art strike for three years. What are you going to do? Where's this creative stuff going to go? The answer is that life during the Art Strike is going to be more creative, not less. I listened to a tape of a testimonial evening that was done in the States, and there was a woman who got up there and said she'd come across this information a couple years ago, and she had because of a number of different factors, not just what we've been saying, she had given up art, and she had gotten back a thousand times over what she was putting into art before.

GR: But there is a happy balance to be struck. There is a balance that we should achieve, isn't there?

TL: Well, no, I just think at the moment art isn't up on the list. Maybe one day when we sort things out, maybe one day when we have the right to, we can come back and start hanging stuff on the walls again, but not the way things are, Gerry.

GR: O.k. Tony Lowes, thank you, good morning.

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Cultural Workers in Support of YAWN

Sub Space, 221 West Benton Street, Iowa City IA 52246 USA

Lettre Documentaire, B.P. 249, 33012 Bordeaux Cedex France

ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEES

ASAC (United Kingdom), BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, England

ASAC (Eire), c/o Tony Lowes, allihies, Bantry, West Cork, Ireland

