

When Blowing the Strike is Striking the Blow

THERE'S A LOT TO BE SAID FOR THE ART STRIKE, which is just as well, since between 1990 and 1993 nothing can be written or painted or performed in its support. There's something to be said against it, too—no time limit here—and plenty of room for dissent.

Art Strike propaganda claims that the artists' strike will have the effect of bringing the class struggle to the artistic realm. It argues that the most radical art and the most critical artists are actually supporting capitalist social relations even when they purport to subvert them; artistic practice must therefore cease since it stabilises and nourishes the social relations its more oppositional forms claim to contest.

This argument is akin to a wider challenge made by postmodern philosophers such as Baudrillard, who argue that criticism is no longer possible and that the only efficient way of dissenting from capitalist society is to commit suicide. The *Art Strike Handbook* quotes Baudrillard:

Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetually surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything. If it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction consumed.¹

Any active dissent can be commodified, turned into a product useful for the maintenance of capitalism. The slogans of revolutionary politics are used to sell bank accounts, the painting that challenges beauty and form is placed in the gallery where its beauty and form are admired and valued and bought and sold; the biting poem is read on the radio to accompany the liberal critics' display of sorrow at the state of the world. Whatever is said against can be made to speak for, and like any weapon, art can be turned against those who use it.

The art strikers have emerged out of a tradition of avant-garde culture which has recognised these problems and continually agitates against what it has defined as the recuperation of criticism. In different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists and Situationists, all realised that anything they produced could be integrated into the structures they opposed. *Whatever doesn't kill power is killed by it.*²

Thus the Dadaists watched their anti-art works being categorised as works of art, and aimed their whole project at the evasion of this recuperation. After five years of agitation against capital, war and

morality, they reached an impasse of suicide or silence. Everything they made or said or wrote was turned against its critical purpose and used against them. So they scrapped the whole project. In effect, like the cultural workers of the 1980s, they decided to go on strike.

The Dadaists left a legacy which has indeed been recuperated in the form of commodified works of art, the use of their techniques of collage and photomontage in advertisements, and the presentation of their work in coffee table books and university seminars. They were right to believe that this was inevitable as long as they were merely producing, and not controlling the means of production. But on the way, they did constitute a challenge to bourgeois morality, the philosophical assumptions on which it was based and the propaganda of the First World War which legitimated its brutality. In the end they felt that their subversions of established values were merely contributing to the culture they wished to destroy. The question became one of whether their participation outweighed their silence as the most effective weapon. It was not a matter of giving up the struggle, but the use of giving up as a means of struggle.

Like the art strikers, the Dadaists recognised that both art and the artist are as guilty in their participation as any other commodity or worker. This perspective has far more validity than that adopted by Marcuse and Adorno, who argued that the Dadaist project was misguided in its attacks on conventional art. They considered that art has an autonomy and distance from capitalist relations which must be preserved rather than undermined; art bears an essential negativity derived from its peculiar Form; its rearrangements of reality are conducted on principles of order quite alien to those of capitalism. This Form renders art a "refuge and a vantage point from which to denounce the reality established through domination."³

Although Adorno and Marcuse criticised the anti-artists for attacking artistic Form, they concurred with the avant-garde aim of ending the distinction between art and the rest of reality. Indeed, Marcuse wished to see a society organised according to the aesthetic principles he saw preserved in art. But they both argued that the achievement of this integration was not a task in which artists can participate. Art must remain in a realm in which calm reflection can remind us of the truths of an authentic life which will be achieved after the revolution.

Expressing their rejection of this view in different ways, the Dadaists, Surrealists and Situationists worked for the collapse of the distinction between art and the rest of life in the here and now. Rather than waiting until after the revolution, they argued that the integration of art and life was fundamental to the achievement of revolution, which is possible only because of the subjection of capitalism to

¹ Jean Baudrillard, excerpted from *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. From: Stewart Home, ed., *Art Strike Handbook*. Sabotage Editions, London, U.K., 1989. p. 38.

² Mustapha Khayati, *Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary*. From: Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*. Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, Calif., 1981. p. 171.

³ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Macmillan, London, U.K., 1979. p. 18.

continual assault on all fronts: ideological, cultural and economic.

If art is an area of contestation like any other, it is also an area of integration and recuperation. The Art Strike is a recognition of this double role: it brings industrial struggle to art, challenges artists to jeopardise their careers and identities in the same way as other striking workers, and demands that those who continue to work justify their lack of solidarity. It also presupposes that art is integral to capitalist relations, and that the recuperation of critical or radical art is an inevitable attribute of this society. But the Art Strike is merely one way of tackling this situation, and can only be effective if it is regarded as a tactic in the struggle against capitalism rather than the end of tactics. By enlisting Baudrillard in the defence of the strike, its protagonists are in danger of confusing these roles.

Baudrillard argues that the history of criticism, including the Dada experience, shows that recuperation is inevitable, and that a belief in the possibility of critical art or any other discourse is naive. This renders criticism pointless, and places the critic in an unjustifiable position. Participation in the networks of power it attacks will always be supportive of them, and silence, apathy, and the refusal to contribute or participate in the debate are the only valid responses to existing society. So Baudrillard says nothing? Far from it. He produces books, articles and academic papers by the dozen, most of which are couched in mystified and complex terminology which makes them inaccessible to all those without the opportunity to study them. The disengagement he proposes is strictly for other people, the masses express their dissent through passivity while the philosophers continue to profit from and, by their own arguments, support the capitalist system of relations they purport to be attacking.

Anyone who does refuse to be creative for the three years of the Art Strike will be less hypocritical than Baudrillard but not necessarily more critical. At the logical extreme of Dada's suicide, Baudrillard's philosophy, or today's Art Strike, is the view that it would have been more damaging to capitalism if nothing had ever been created. Then there would be no ideas or art works to recuperate, and capitalism would have been deprived of a part of its cultural support. But where there is nothing to be recuperated, there is nothing to fight with: the capitalist establishment might be disarmed, but so would its opponents.

If there is one characteristic of capitalism we may be sure of, it is that nothing can escape it. But faced with an impossible situation, the loud and active search for possibilities is an alternative to silent passivity. Nothing can escape the saboteur either, and the legacy left

by Dada and others is part of an armoury which can be plundered by the subversives as well as the establishment. The culture of the past must not be destroyed or abandoned, but superseded in its use of "partisan propaganda purposes"⁴ in the present. This can easily be attacked as a form of liberal reformism, changing from within, etc. But we do live within capitalism, and there is no such thing as change from without. The question becomes one of how the change from within must be pursued. The strike is one answer, but it is just as likely that the most effective anti-capitalist artists are those who work as saboteurs. Their awareness of the recuperation of their work does not petrify them; instead, they use this recognition to sidestep and expose the mechanisms, recuperation amongst them, which perpetuate capitalism.

The value of the Art Strike is in its proposal of silence, rather than silence itself; the propaganda rather than the deed. The Art Strike must be seen as a means of exposing, rather than escaping recuperation. Art Strike propaganda reveals the extent of recuperations and proposes an action which cannot be recuperated. But anything which is totally invulnerable to recuperation cannot be used in contestation either. Although the Art Strike propaganda is meaningless without the Art Strike, the strike is also useless without the propaganda. Inaction must first be justified and explained through action—you have to say why you're going to be silent. The art strikers claim that the tactics of industrial struggle are being brought to art, but the strike is not the only industrial weapon, and artists have always taken their techniques of sabotage and subversion from workers. Disputes vary according to the nature of the work in question: although car workers might well stop making cars, printers might prefer to print their own propaganda rather than stop printing.

The Art Strike is a valid response to the problems of criticism, but it is not the only one. It is a good thing only insofar as it produces more radical art, of which its own propaganda is a perfect example. Consequently it is a good thing only in its failure, and since this is inevitable, the Art Strike is necessarily a good thing. Once put into the world, tactics such as this can be used by anyone for any ends. So long may such active resistance continue! Here's to the saboteurs, the double agents, and those who turn the world around! Don't strike, occupy!

—Sadie Plant, from *Here and Now 10*, Leeds, U.K., 1990

⁴ Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, *Methods of Detournement*. From: Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*. Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, Calif., 1981. p. 9.

YAWN cares to make little distinction between its "readers" and its "contributors" as such, and would like to bring about an 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 our culture, even if they do no more than function in it. It is those least challenged of assumptions which demand the most attention. Use your 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 without SASE, a copy of any published work will be sent to the submitting participant.

Cultural Work from these Sources has been Included

ASAC (United Kingdom), BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, England
Bureau of Public Secrets, P.O. Box 1044, Berkeley CA 94701
Here & Now, P.O. Box 109, Leeds LS5 3AA, England

