

Theory for Theory's Sake Propaganda in Favour of a Campaign for an Art Strike

'Cluster round the jukebox for some songs you've probably heard before / It's nothing if it isn't pure'

[Yeah Yeah Noh, *Stealing in the Name of the Lord*]

'The art strike (...) is a good thing only insofar as it produces more radical art, of which its own propaganda is a perfect example.'

[Sadie Plant, *Here and Now* 10]

The success or failure of Karen Home's 'art strike' propaganda can clearly not be judged in terms of how many artists do in fact down tools from now until 1993 — that would be too cruel. However, I cannot accept Plant's alternative evaluation: a political failure is not necessarily an artistic triumph. I would argue, on the contrary, that Home's enterprise is a bad thing all round, reactionary both in what it says (politics) and in how it says it (art). The Art Strike is a good thing only insofar as it is ignored completely¹: any 'success' will be a bad thing. Its importance lies in the weaknesses which its success has highlighted. This is most obvious in the area of concepts of art, where the Art Strike has succeeded in popularising a peculiarly banal and ill-thought-out version of what art is and what 'good art' is or might be. It is about time we got our own ideas on the subject sorted out. As Mike Peters' article in *Here and Now 10* began to suggest, it is not enough simply to advocate 'more radical art.' We must first identify what art actually is and does; then we can consider how it might be capable of being 'radical.'

My position, briefly, is as follows. Jean-Pierre Voyer wrote, 'Whether the subject sinks into madness, practices art or participates in an uprising (...) the two poles of daily life—contact with a narrow and separate reality on one hand and spectacular contact with the totality on the other—are simultaneously abolished, opening the way for the unity of individual life' (*Reich—how to use*). Well, no he didn't—for 'art' read 'theory'—but the description holds good. Finding the language for real communication, as opposed to both a spectacular understanding of the totality and the meaninglessness of everyday 'life'²: going beyond individual isolation and spectacular

collectivity into a genuine commonality; this is the process of making theory, but also that of making art. Voyer's emphasis on the subjective experience of making theory, its effects on the theorist's character armour as well as on her view of the world, apply here also. Art, just as much as theory, is a process of *making common meanings*: to the extent that those meanings are 'radical' this will be a taxing activity, for the artist as much as the theorist. Contented artists, as much as contented theorists, should be avoided: they are clearly engaged in reiterating meanings which are already common. Tortured artists, on the other hand, should be sought out and encouraged.

Now, it has for a long time been assumed that art and theory are in fact not comparable, and that anyone involved in the former owes it to the global proletarian struggle to jack it in and concentrate on the latter. (Ironically, much of the suspicion with which Karen Home is now regarded arose for precisely this reason). Like so much else that affects us today, this goes back to the Fifth Conference of the SI (Göteborg, 1961). On that occasion Attila Kotanyi stated that situationist art was impossible under 'the dominant conditions of artistic inauthenticity': any art produced by situationists would promptly be recuperated. By way of solution, Kotanyi proposed that members of the SI continue to produce art, but that all such work be referred to as 'antisituationist.' 'While various confused artists nostalgic for a positive art call themselves situationist, *antisituationist* art will be the mark of the best artists.'

Whether this proposal would work as a solution is unclear; its actual effect was the exclusion of several members. The redirection of the SI's activities onto the plane of theory, and the long-standing bias against art which was eventually to enable Karen Home to impress the hell out of a lot of people by dropping names like Gustav Metzger (Okay, okay, I'd never heard of him either). Whether it was justified in its own terms is equally unclear. While one sympathises with Raoul Vaneigem's call for the SI to cease its involvement in 'the spectacle of refusal,' it's hard to share Vaneigem's confidence

1 Damn!

2 *'Life's about as wonderful as a cold'*—Mark Perry, 1977.

Perry is not known to have been familiar with the situationists' theses on the banalisation of everyday life, but being a 'punk' he was doubtless influenced by them anyway.

that the (predictable) alternative—the refusal of the spectacle³—can be embarked on by the simple expedient of producing theory to the exclusion of art. Indeed, the situationists could only maintain their own faith in theory as a spectacle-free zone by continually contrasting *theory* (hooray!) with *ideology* (boo, hiss!): a distinction which does little to illuminate the actual relations of production of theory, and which is in any case difficult to make with any consistency. However we describe the process of recuperation (and Kotanyi's statement that situationist art 'will be recuperated by society and used against us' contains too much paranoia and too little politics to be really useful) we need to be clear that it can be applied to everything. Kotanyi's fear, a school of art called 'situationism,' never came true⁴: but the political ideology of 'situationism' appeared in 1968 and has never gone away.

My contention, then, is that the situationists were mistaken in labelling art as spectacular and theory as authentic. The reason why no art exists which can be guaranteed free of the taint of the spectacle (or of 'bourgeois culture') is that there are no such guarantees, for art or for anything else: there is no 'this side' of the spectacle. Theory is not the situationists' utopian pure negative, nor is art a tool of the commodity economy. Rather, both art and theory are means of communication—languages of common meanings. Both come in new, old, subversive and spectacular varieties; both, if found threatening, will swiftly be recuperated; both can be plagiarised (or detoured, as we pro-situs used to say)—and the plagiarisms themselves may be useful or useless, radical or reactionary.

The more attentive reader will by now have realised that I am not in sympathy with the Art Strike. I can best explain my reasons by referring the reader once again to that historic meeting in Göteborg: more specifically, to Karen Home's view of the matter, as given in her *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*. (Is there any justification for that 'e' on the end of 'Lettrism'? I think we should be told). Home rejects the SI's verdict in favour of theory and against art, siding with the Scandinavian and German situationists who were excluded following the 'antisituationist art' proposal and who later formed a second Situationist International. (For the sake of clarity I have adopted the real SI's term of abuse for this group, which I will refer to as the 'Nashist' SI). Home speaks approvingly of these artists, who shared

'a belief in the collective, and noncompetitive, production of art,' However, we're not actually talking about *art* here:

Overt and conscious use of collective practices to make 'cultural artifacts' do not really fit the description 'art'—at least if one is using the term to describe the high culture of the ruling class in capitalist societies.

Nor, indeed, if one is using the term to describe pig-farming. The SI's valuation of theory rested on two oppositions: between theory and art, and between theory and ideology. Having reversed the terms of the first opposition, Home echoes the second with an equally mythical dichotomy: all art is either 'high culture' (boo!) or collective cultural artifact production (hooray!). Like its counterpart, this is not an easy position to maintain empirically.

The significance of all this for the Art Strike is twofold. Firstly, the terms become blurred: should all 'art' cease, or only identifiably 'high culture' forms? Or should art be allowed to continue only if it passes the Home test ('overt and conscious use of collective practices')? This last interpretation might explain why issue 8 of the paper *Anticlockwise* contains both anti-culture material and an article in praise of Mail Art by Mark Lawson⁵. But material from the Mail Art networks has appeared in galleries before now, which presumably means that, too, is now an ornament of the ruling class: and in any case Home is currently advocating a complete 'refusal of creativity.' Problems, problems! More importantly, if one rejects the picture of art as a sea of ruling class culture with a few islands of subversive practice dotted about in it, the whole thing collapses. The entire 'struggle against the received culture of the reigning society' which Home has been conducting since 1985⁶ is built on the idea that 'received culture' disseminates the values of 'the reigning society,' with art in particular representing 'the high culture of the ruling class in capitalist societies.' This image of culture as a conveyor belt, carrying the values of the ruling class into everyday consciousness, is necessitated only by Home's *a priori* decision to divide art into sheep and goats. It's certainly not necessitated by the facts. True, art is a material process within society; true, art is never innocent of the existing social order, and is always under pressure to promote it—within the artist's mind as much as anywhere. This, though, only adds up to saying that art—and 'culture'—is a means of communication and therefore a space of contestation, or a battleground as we say in English. The task is not to combat received culture but to get to work on it: embracing parts of it, emphatically rejecting others but above all diverting⁷ it to our own purposes.

In fairness, it must be said that there is more to the Art Strike than that. There is also an argument about artists as people, alleging that their status as pseudo-radical high-culture merchants gives them elitist delusions about 'the superiority of their "creativity" over the leisure and work pursuits of the social majority.' Without the

3 Cf. the following comment on the Unification Church mass wedding of a few years back: 'A spectacle of pairs, assuredly. Let us not forget, however, that this was also a pair of spectacles.' Taken from Alec Douglas H.'s *The End of Finality* (Improbable Books, 1989). The situationists, we must conclude, never got much beyond the reversal of terms. It will be for others to create the *terms of reversal*.

4 Partial disproof: 'Before Pop and after Abstract Expressionism there was a stillborn movement, based in continental Europe... Called 'Situationism,' this movement expressed a rebellious need to counterpose the creative and irreverent with the anticipated [*sic*] homogeneity of media society. Essentially a nonstarter as art *per se*, the movement had, nonetheless, an influence on French cinema and architecture.'—Philip Core reviewing an exhibition at the ICA in *New Statesman and Society*, 30th June 1989. Of course, the curators invited this kind of misinterpretation by staging the exhibition in an art gallery, rather than simply getting out and creating situations.

5 Sorry, *Pawson*. Apologies all round!

6 Not single-handedly, of course! Home's struggles have been shared with the PRAXIS group, a guy called Tony from Cork and numerous magazines around the world all called *Smile*. In addition many interesting uses have been made of that famous general-purpose pseudonym or 'multiple identity,' 'George Eliot.'

7 Or *detourning* it. Next week: *deriving* for beginners.

prop of the anti-‘culture’ argument, though, this looks less like radicalism and more like guilt-tripping. Elitism is a disfigurement of the character: it’s almost as bad as spots. If artists are worried about it, though, the answer is simple: go away and get it cleared up. We don’t want them moaning to the rest of us about how ugly they are and all the parties they’re missing (‘I couldn’t go out looking like this what would all those beautiful workers say?’). In any case, elitism is a sign of incipient co-option: and co-option means that your work is being misappropriated. Don’t give it up—take it back! Just say no!

So much for the overt—political—meanings of the Art Strike. There is, however, more to it than that: there is a sense, as Sadie Plant implied, in which the Art Strike is an art work. This can best be appreciated by looking again at the question of success or failure, our assessment of which depends entirely on how we interpret the Art Strike itself. Taken straight, it’s clearly a miserable failure. It is unimaginable that an actual Art Strike will materialise; even the idea has made very little headway outside the pages of *Smile*, and none at all outside the anarchist milieu. Talking about ‘the Art Strike’ at all is doing it a fairly large favour: what exists is a campaign for an art strike, or more precisely propaganda in favour of a campaign for an art strike. That propaganda has no more popular support than the calls for a general strike that issue from time to time from the organs of the corpse of Leninism, and as such deserves the same oblivion. Alternatively, we can take the whole thing as a rather deadpan joke at the expense of ‘political artists’ (if you’re so radical let’s see you on the picket line), but this doesn’t improve matters much: hardly anyone has either got the joke or fallen for it.

These, however, are not the only possibilities. In between lies the whole terrain of irony, of saying one thing and meaning two or three others; the terrain where meanings split and proliferate, where the distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘art’ ceases to make sense. This, clearly, is the area where Home’s promotion of the Art Strike⁸ operates; this, too, is one of the areas where really new meanings get made⁹, and an area where *Here and Now*¹⁰ has squatter’s rights. In other words, despite Home’s post-situationist attachment to a rigid division between art and theory, the disjuncture between the Art Strike’s apparent meaning and its real impact mean that it works, if it works at all, as a combination of art and theory; or rather, as a demonstration of the impossibility of separating the two.

It makes sense, then, to refer to the Art Strike’s propaganda as

8 My knowledge of the originators of the Art Strike—the PRAXIS group—is woefully inadequate: however, I suspect that they actually took the Art Strike seriously (but that’s Americans for you). Only on its arrival in England was it transformed by Karen Home’s creative genius into the polyvalent multimedia event that we now know so well.

9 Burroughs half-realised this when he asserted that cut-ups foretold the future: simply rearrange some words to make an unknown phrase or saying and ‘the future leaks through.’ Certainly, new meanings could be created by this method: it’s a kind of automatic writing. I don’t know, though—call me old-fashioned, but I prefer meanings which have been consciously made to the kind that leak out of the end of a random process. You can’t beat a good work of art, that’s what I say.

10 A magazine of radial tyres.

‘radical art,’ at least in the sense of ‘unprecedented art.’ This, though, is not the only consideration: not all new meanings are good ones. What, then, is the Art Strike really *saying*? Two main themes are apparent: a complete abandonment of politics, associated with an impression of a kind of ultimate and insuppressible radicalism. The first can best be approached by considering the hypothetical political impact of a realised art strike. Industrial action works to counteract the isolation and passivity which are endemic in this society: strikes are a collective rejection of the strikers’ role as workforce and an affirmation that they’re worth more than that. A strike by artists, though, would actually promote both passivity and isolation: the strikers would not be a group refusing work but a scattering of individuals doing nothing. To this picture we must add the facts that an art strike will not happen, and that very few people either know or care what artists do with their time anyway. A call for inaction, which is bound to be ignored, and which is addressed to people whose actions nobody notices: what is this but an elaborate demonstration of the futility of politics? The Marxists aspired to change the world: the point, it would appear, is to withdraw from it.

This relates closely to the second point. Home has made an easy reputation out of radicals’ tendency to confuse the concepts of ‘qualitative supersession’ and *reductio ad absurdum*: that is, to assume that all previous radical practice can be superseded simply by ‘taking it further.’ This generally takes fairly sophisticated forms: talking about ‘situationist ideology,’ for example, or alleging that radical art is part of ruling class culture. Latterly, though, Karen Home has specialised in the most radical-looking strategy of all: negate everything. The tendency of the Art Strike is to argue that, outside itself, there is no authentic opposition: that all oppositional activity, radical art included, is a form of social integration. The empirical difficulties here are obvious and major: it is hard to see how anyone other than Karen Home could ever prove that they were actually *opposing* existing society, and not merely indulging in *oppositionalism*—except perhaps by supporting the Art Strike, reading Richard Allen and slagging off the SI. The strategy which Home has ‘taken further’ here is the division between the SI and all other ‘theorists,’ between the artists of the Nashist SI and all other ‘artists,’ and for that matter between the Seventh Day Adventists and all other ‘Christians.’ What is even more important is the end result. So complete a negation results in a politics not of negation but of abstention: if nothing is authentic *nothing can be done*.

This is the true message of the Art Strike. Ultimately Home, like Baudrillard, is advocating silence and inaction¹¹; is promoting, as the ultimate negative, alienation from one’s own capacity to act. This has its own interest for theory-collectors and the terminally disillusioned¹²: its main interest for the rest of us is that it marks Home out as a practitioner of theory for theory’s sake, political activity taken up in the belief that it is pointless. To describe this as radical would do violence to the meaning of the word: the word

11 Articles in *Smile* have advocated ‘sensuous inactivity’ for the duration of the Art Strike. Idle buggers!

12 At the ICA exhibition a couple of copies of *Smile* were shown, exhibited under glass so that we could appreciate the witty and amusing cover art. Those responsible are believed to fall into both categories at once.

'reactionary' fits much better. 'Boring' does quite nicely, too¹³. As with the theory of Baudrillard, as with the 'art for art's sake' espoused by aesthetes from Walter Pater to the Neoists¹⁴, the Art Strike's only real achievement will be the entertainment it gives its audience—and, of course, the careers it makes. [?

13 Though, to be fair, this is a difficulty encountered from time to time by the greatest of theorists.

If the element of boredom I have experienced in writing this finds an

echo in the reader, what else is this but one more proof of our failure to live?

as Raoul Vaneigem asked in his foreword to *The Kids' Book of How to Do It*, or *The Revolution of Everyday Life* as it's sometimes known. How true that is, how very true. And what a cop-out.

14 Home once described a reference to 'situationist ideology' as a 'calculated insult.' To judge from Home's account of their activities, describing the Neoists as artists is more in the nature of a calculated compliment.

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