

**YAWN** is a sporadic newsletter which seeks to offer a critical look at our culture in all its forms. Responses and submissions from readers are welcome and encouraged, especially critical observations about cultural institutions and seldom challenged principles concerning culture. Anything sent may be considered for inclusion in a future issue without specific prior notification. **YAWN** strives to be a collective, mostly anonymous, exchange-driven effort. Responses of any kind will be met reciprocally in the following manner: the respondent will receive those materials appearing in the next bulk mailing. Subscriptions to **YAWN** are available for \$10 for 25 issues. **YAWN** is archived at <http://yawn.detrinet.net/>.

## What Makes Art Strike Such a Bad Idea?

**U** NKNOWN TO MOST PEOPLE, an art strike is currently in progress on at least three continents, calling on artists "to stop making, distributing, selling, exhibiting or discussing their work" and for all institutions involved with the showing and printing of art or the training of artists to stop all such operation. Stewart Home, the major architect and proponent of the strike, sees art as "a symptom of the disease capitalism" and the strike as a means of undermining capitalism by "intensifying the class war." The strikers, however, are always quick to point out the the Art Strike (1990-1993) is a bad idea and that it will fail to accomplish what it sets out to do. The importance of the strike, finally, exists in the mere conception of the strike rather than in the execution of it, and as such it is designed as one large conceptual art piece, performance art without the performance.

The Art Strike (1990-1993) was not a call to immediate action, but a process that has taken and will take years to accomplish. In 1985, the PRAXIS group announced its plans for the Art Strike, to be modeled after the strike German artist Gustav Metzger called for in 1974 to destroy those cultural institutions which have had a "negative effect" on artistic production; this lasted from 1977 to 1980 and attracted no artists besides Metzger. The current strike, however, is designed to undermine the status of the artist in the current power structure of our culture.

One of their major techniques in this regard was the invention of Karen Eliot, who is less than an ectoplasm. She is but a name that people adopted in the five years before the strike to began to undermine the "myth of genius" and the ideas of "identity, individuality, originality, value and myth." Karen Eliot usually produced a magazine which carried the title *SMILE*, and at any time there were a number of such magazines in the US and UK. One problem with the persona of Karen Eliot is that she has a persona. Listen to her (who may be him) speak, and hear the same cryptic propaganda that is a part of her speech or writing. Certainly, the personalities of the 100 or so people who have been her have been neatly obliterated, but the development of a replacement identity with its own individuality, originality and value has helped to subtly undermine the participant's intentions.

The other antecedent to the Art Strike was the development (apparently simultaneously conceived in different parts of the world) of the conception of plagiarism as an artistic tactic. The expounding of plagiarism emphasizes the collective (rather than individual) nature of art (what the strikers sometimes call "cultural production"). Festivals of Plagiarism were held around the world (San Francisco, London, Glasgow) as a means to question the rights people have to art as property, the potential strikers had begun the "struggle against the received culture of the reigning society," against the culture which perceives art works as being worth something and belonging to specific individuals rather than to the

culture as a whole.

The Art Strike is said to be a call to do something else rather than nothing, but that "something else" is fairly undefined. One striker has even stated that art doesn't *necessarily* have to be abandoned during the strike as long as the striker's attitudes towards art change (this emendation, however, came from an editor who decided to shut down his magazine for the strike but whose band, the Tape-beatles, has voted through a kind of strike vote not to recognize the strike and to continue both performance and production). The Art Strike is meant to be a time to reconceptualize art, to stop viewing it as a superior form of knowledge, to return to reality (after having spent decades escaping reality through art); it is a time to stop understanding art as a special activity. The Art Strike intends to slow the drift away from play which has been caused by too much concentration on art, but this assumes that art itself is not play.

A number of reactions to Art Strike have appeared (and sometimes disappeared) since autumn 1989. The first might have been the Forced Art Participation (FAP); the call for this action, identified as the idea of an anonymous woman, appeared in **YAWN** n°4, a broadsheet and Art Strike organ. The plan meant to eradicate the special status of "artist" by making such status mandatory and universal: everyone would be forced to make art. **YAWN** attacked this idea by pointing out its inherent fascism and the author's "fear of liberation from the hierarchically imposed vision of the world." the proprietors of Xexoxial Endarchy, an indefatigable multi-media art establishment, have called for an Art Glut (1990-2000), increasing the number of years of activity (as compared with the Art Strike)

## ART STRIKE!!

(1990-1993)



and calling for increased production in place of none. The A 1 Waste Paper Company, which is actually a couple of British mail artists, is proselytizing for a Pretentious Drivel Strike. Along the same line, FaGaGaGa, a group of US mail artists, has mailed out postcards asking, "How About a Hype Strike?" US artist Mark Bloch has suggested a Word Strike (1991-1994), during which we are supposed to follow the motto "Don't say 'art' unless you mean 'money'"; Bloch sees this as a way of answering the requirements of the strikers without stooping to ineffectual and possibly harmful tactics.

"The Art Strike will fail because it is a bad idea." That is one of the infuriatingly glib and specious remarks of the Art Strikers. They don't explain why it's a bad idea. Because every participant is an artist who has no chance of making any money through art? Because art doesn't actually subjugate any class of individuals? Because the idea of leveling talent fails to appreciate the contributions of individuals? Because the "myth of genius" has never been used to justify inequality, repression and famine? Or because what is described as an informational picket line and a way to teach others is actually a work shutdown? The strike has

been and will continue to be ignored by both the major culture and the proletariat its participants hope to free of the stifling barrier between high and low culture. The manifestos of these cultural workers (artists) are too difficult and abstract for anyone who is stupid and too stupid for anyone who is not.

The worst problem with the Art Strike (1990-1993) is that it does not even truly attempt to solve any problems, and that all it offers in return is the loss of people's artistic lives. Although the strike rails against gender-specific market art imbued with social prestige, most strikers are males working in forms of art with virtually no female participants (*and* little prestige). The strike is supposedly directed only against the self-referential Modernist and Post-modernist traditions of art because these are of no worth to the proletariat, but the average worker has no interest in the art project that the Art Strike actually is either. And the strikers' idea that art cannot continue whilst there is hunger and destitution in the world does not force the strikers to do anything about those problems; all it even attempts to accomplish is the equitable distribution of misery.

[Geoff Huth, from "Platform" as published in Critical Wave no. 18, September, 1990

## VOICES/How do you respond to the above article?



**Doris Rowe, 63**  
Retired teacher  
Gore, Okla.



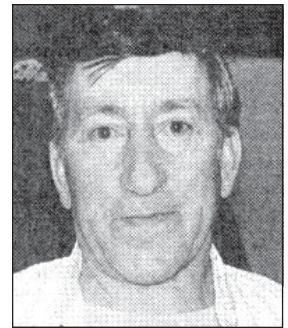
**Gino Straniero, 55**  
Letter carrier  
Holmdel, N.J.



**Claude Jackson, 39**  
Auto worker  
Highland, Ind.



**Milton Bins, 56**  
Deputy director  
Washington, D.C.



**Myrt Bauer, 45**  
Real estate broker  
Moraga, Calif.

I don't think he knows what he's talking about. The Art Strike is not a 'work of conceptual art.' In fact, the only 'artistic' thing about it is only that it is done by 'artists.' Some people say that 'art is what artists do,' but I don't believe it. Are you prepared to call it 'art' when an artist puts out his dog or brushes her teeth? No sir! The rest of us have been on 'art strike' all our lives! I just have to applaud anyone concerned enough to want to change things.

He's right when he says there's a problem with the 'Karen Eliot' persona. The problem is that it has become too much associated with certain people, which undermines the participants' intentions. There can be no middle ground in using these collective single names, if they are to be effective. 'Karen Eliot' is dead—if you want to start using a new name, make sure no one can tell it's you. I recommend 'Anon.' myself. I use it all the time, except now.

Art Strike *is* a bad idea. Huth misses the point. It's a bad idea because most 'artists' are 'individualists,' and therefore lack the solidarity necessary to participate in an 'art strike.' So as a practical matter, 'art strike' will not work. But this is not to say that it will not have some good effect, for it will. It already has. People are really talking about serious stuff for the first time in my memory. Huth wrote his article, didn't he? That should tell you something.

If Huth's 'proletariat' is too 'stupid' to understand the Art Strikers' 'manifestoes,' it doesn't matter, because the 'manifestoes' are not directed at non-artists. It doesn't matter to the Art Strike if folks like me don't know anything about it, because we're not the ones with the problem. Those who cast themselves in the role of 'artists'—and folks like Huth, who buy into that attitude—that have the problem. And it is they who need to examine what they hold to be true.

It's true that 'art strike' doesn't solve any problems with art. But I for one never look to art works for solutions to problems. The most an 'artist' can hope to do is point at a problem and suggest that it needs to be looked at more closely. Besides, there may not be a single 'solution' to the 'problem' of art. I'm the last person to impose what I think should be done on everyone else! No one has to go on strike—or even think there's a problem—if they don't want to.

Cultural Workers made use of by YAWN

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