

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/>.

ART STRIKE

The Most Radical Gesture

Sadie Plant

The 1980s were marked by a series of 'assaults on culture,' culminating in calls for an art strike in 1990. Challenging all conventions of identity, originality, and the very nature of cultural production, the Praxis project convened a Festival of Plagiarism which reworked situationist notions of detournement and challenged the hypocrisy of high art distinctions between the plagiarism and evolutionary development of techniques and ideas. Plagiarism, wrote Stewart Home, 'saves time and effort, improves results, and shows considerable initiative on the part of the individual plagiarist. As a revolutionary tool it is ideally suited to the needs of the twentieth century.'

But Praxis distanced itself from the purposeless reproductions of postmodern culture with definitions of plagiarism as 'a collective undertaking far removed from the post-modern "theories" of appropriation ... Plagiarism is for life, post-modernism is fixated on death.' And the pamphlet accompanying the Festival reinforced the plagiarists' distance from the postmodern insistence that progress is impossible and an endless reiteration of the inevitable.

'Plagiarism in late capitalist society articulates a semi-conscious cultural condition: namely, that there "is nothing left to say" ... The practitioners of much post-modern theory have tended to proclaim this feeling rather smugly, but if there is nothing to say, they yet demonstrate that there will always be something to sell. On the other hand, there are practitioners active in many disciplines who, recognising the necessity for collective action demanded by media such as film and electronic tape, engage in plagiarism in an attempt to expose and explode once and for all the individualistic attitudes which tend to make all current human activity seem redundant and increasingly alienated.'

The moves against individualism and originality made in the Festival of Plagiarism were underlined by proposals for multiple names. Karen Eliot, the most popular of these, was launched in 1985 as a name to be 'adopted by a variety of cultural workers at various times in order to carry through tasks related to building up a body of work ascribed to "Karen Eliot"' and so 'highlight the problems thrown up by the various mental sets pertaining to identity, individuality, originality, value and truth.'

When one becomes Karen Eliot one's previous existence consists of the acts other people have undertaken using the name.

When one becomes Karen Eliot one has no family, no parents, no birth. Karen Eliot was not born, s/he was materialised from social forces, constructed as a means of entering the shifting terrain that circumscribes the 'individual' and society.

Hundreds of people have adopted Karen Eliot for specific works and projects precisely because recognition and reward — so often the synonyms of commodification and recuperation are provocatively evaded by the anonymity of a multiple name. Multiple names are connected to radical theories of play. The idea is to create an 'open situation' for which no one in particular is responsible.

It goes without saying that few artists accepted the invitation to refuse creativity extended by those calling for an art strike between 1990 and 1993 to which these interventions led. Carrying a provocative ambiguity which incited confusion, the art strike reintroduced a whole range of issues around questions of strategy, recuperation, and the relation between culture and politics. Home argued that 'most "revolutionaries" have yet to realise the importance of fighting the bourgeoisie on cultural, as well as economic and political, fronts' and expressed the hope that 'the Art Strike will go some way towards correcting this oversight.'

Proposed as a means of 'intensifying the class struggle within the cultural, economic and political spheres', and aiming 'to demoralise a cross section of the bourgeois class,' the importance of the art strike was said to lie 'not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the class war.' For Home, art has never been a progressive political force, and the art strike was in part an attempt to demoralise those artists who believe their work to be oppositional or subversive. Situationist demands for a poeticised and freely created environment were only ever bourgeois dreams imposed on a disinterested proletariat by an over-enthusiastic avant-garde. Situationist hopes for an aestheticised daily experience have indeed come to 'reinforce the overall position of the bourgeoisie' and situationist demands for the suppression and realisation of art in the name of free creativity, imagination, and pleasure are reactionary desires for a new cycle of mediations which, 'in the post-modern era ... serve Power in the same way that honesty, truth, progress &c., served the capitalist system in the classical modern age.'

To demand the destruction of art in the name of creativity is

merely a reform of Power. To trade off art against creativity is to take back with one hand what has been rejected by the other. Those who genuinely oppose alienated social relations will not only break with art but affirm the refusal of creativity.

Desires for authenticity were condemned as 'the most cynical of all the pseudo-needs.' Offering 'the spectacle of its own inadequacy' for mass consumption, capitalism 'uses this spectacle as the means of reselling itself to those who "imagine" they have "progressed" beyond bourgeois values in a "return" to the "authentic".' Refusing all mediation and values, Praxis declared: 'ABOLISH PLEASURE/REFUSE CREATIVITY/SMASH THE IMAGINATION/DESIRE IN RUINS/THE PRESENT IS ABSOLUTE/ EVERYTHING NOW!'

Raising questions of authorship, responsibility, and authenticity, these adventures have contributed to debates dating back to Dada's collaborations, Tzara's cut-up poems, Duchamp's readymades, and surrealism's exquisite corpses. Surrealist arguments about who, or what, constitutes the locus of artistic production and responsibility were epitomised by an affair in which Louis Aragon, threatened with prosecution for lines in *Red Front* which enthused, 'Kill the cops, comrades!' was unwillingly defended by Breton on the grounds that poets can never be held responsible for their own works when these are merely transcripts of an uncontrollable unconscious. And it is in the cultivation of this sense of an anonymous, possibly ubiquitous, and uncontrollable surge of interruptive and provocative desire that those associated with Karen Eliot and the art strike have been most successful.

The strike itself, however, is a different matter. The interventions made around the Festival of Plagiarism were conceived as 'the show-down that paved the way for the final conflict of Art Strike,' a last attempt to subvert culture from within before the tactics of sabotage come to an end with the recognition that any participation inevitably enters into a relation of support with the system of values and economic relations it seeks to undermine. 'Only total opposition, both theoretical and practical (i.e., silence), is irrecoverable, declares *The Art Strike Handbook* in an apparent vindication of Baudrillard's claim that art 'no longer contests anything, if ever it did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction "consumed".' Art 'can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, no mistake, when ideologies clash or simply begin to wear out, the most mercenary sign can become a good anarchist.'

Nevertheless, calls for silence, disappearance, suicide, and refusals to participate in a game so difficult to play can have a powerful effect. The end of Dada, and the dissolution of both the SI and the Italian autonomists all testify that 'only the movements which were able to cease, to stop by themselves before dropping dead, have existed!' Absences — of meaning, participation, reality, and identity — can constitute useful tactics in the struggle to unmask the social and economic relations of contemporary capitalist society. But their perpetration must be deliberate and intentional: although the drift into meaninglessness and the free acceptance of the commodification, silence, and apathy invited by capitalist social relations can be provocative and subversive, it cannot be turned into a universal principle which expresses, with Baudrillard, the inescapable state of the world. It is valid only as

a meaningful gesture made against itself. Dada's absurdities were not performed without reason, and even its suicide was a last bid for autonomy. And knowing when to stop must not be confused with the tactics of despair: 'Let us have no more suicides from weariness, which come like a final sacrifice crowning all those that have gone before,' wrote Vaneigem.

The despair invoked by the art strike has nevertheless engendered a variety of parodies of the intensified search for the irrecoverable, the truly radical gesture, introducing a measure of provocative humour to the world in which nothing can be said or done. Proposals by Karen Eliot for a 'thought strike' appeared in *Here and Now*, calling for 'all theorists to pour coke on their word processors and cease to think' between 3 January 1991 and September 1994. 'Thought is a virus let loose on the world by a self-perpetuating elite in order to market the paraphernalia of the thinker — books, papers, pens, art films, word processors, whiskey,' the statement declared. 'Thought — who needs it? We proclaim the Thought Moratorium,' to be launched at the Festival of Stupidity. 'Events already planned include short personal statements of bewilderment by several passers-by. The Festival will be immediately followed by a retrospective exhibition at the ICA entitled "Thought: was it?"'

The thought strike, actually taken seriously by some readers, was quickly superseded by the 'Post-Serious International', a movement which 'becomes functionally inevitable at that point on the alter it,' but 'it never disturbs the order, which is also its own.' The only value of the art strike lay in its proposal of silence, rather than silence itself; the propaganda rather than the deed. It exposed the dangers of participating in a word to which it is implicitly opposed, but the noise with which it resisted recuperation was far more powerful than silence could ever have been.

Rather more optimistic responses to the circularity of all systems of signification are those which adopt tactics of occupation rather than strike. The possibilities of interrupting systems of communication and information exchange accelerate with the potential for forgery: abuses of copyright, anonymous production, and a whole new world of simulation and reproduction generated by the accessibility of new technology. 'The problems of tactics and strategy revolve around the question of how to turn against capitalism the weapons that commercial necessity has forced it to distribute,' wrote Vaneigem in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, and the relentless democracy imposed by commodity relations has indeed facilitated the appropriation of photocopiers, fax machines, screen printing, and desktop publishers to a host of subversive, playful, and deterritorialising ends. Goods produced by high-prestige manufacturers are already faked by a booming industry of bootlegging whose reproductions of Role watches and Adidas T-shirts are often more prized than the mass-produced originals. 'People don't buy these things because they believe that they're real,' said one bootlegger. 'They appeal to people because they know they're a rip-off. It's a matter of taking the priss out of the multinationals.'

On another front, the international Anticopyright network is busy collecting, distributing, and fly-posting provocative posters. 'When a piece of alien information is placed in the sheer banks of

a shopping mall or office fax a fracture appears,' declare its propagandists. 'Instant and anonymous, splattered in a bus shelter or slipped into a magazine rack it is an economic crime enjoyment without transaction.' Attempts to interrupt the seamless circularity of equivalent signs continue to surface.

With both Baudrillard and the situationists, it has to be accepted that anything which is totally invulnerable to recuperation cannot be used in contestation either. The recognition that weapons can be turned against those who wield them is no reason to dispense with them altogether. 'Each word, idea or symbol is a double agent,' wrote Vaneigem. 'Some, like the word "fatherland" or the policeman's uniform, usually work for authority; but make cruciality continuum when things have gone so far

beyond a joke that all appropriate responses have ceased to be appropriate' and appeals for more thought. 'The mass Media will collapse in the face of a population intensively contemplating the possible implications of a magnetic potato for the future of furniture design.' One of the most provocative of these detournement of calls for silence and suicide, 'Metastasis,' was published in *Leisure* in 1990. Insisting that 'revolutionary proletarians' should 'encourage the growth of cancer in their bodies,' it argues that good health 'is the technical realization of cellular creativity exiled into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of the person' and calls for a 'fight against the capitalist recuperation of the creative cell. Don't let the rich get it all.' [end

ART IS KITSCH

HISTORY IS KITSCH

Art Strike (1990-1993)

The General Art Strike (May 1991) and The Perpetuum Mobile

Dear Colleagues!

The Strike as such is an aesthetic/ethical operation on the deformed body of the reigning Myth.

The Strike—by definition—is declared on the territory between Genesis 15 to 24.

This obscure territory is the theological link of the sweaty cause and deadly effect.

The Gustav Metzger/Stewart Home proposition enlightened the social implications of this relation: the Art Strike clearly defined its position on the Market of the Myth.

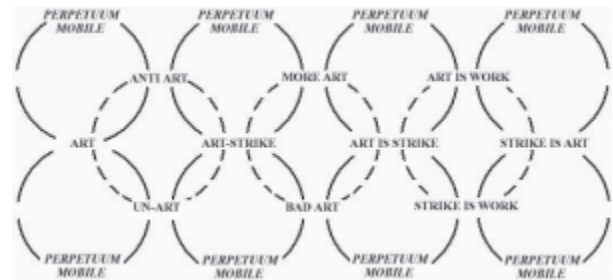
The International Parallel Union of Telecommunications (IPUT), involved in the cultivation of newly established dictionaries of extra-mythological languages, practicing different forms of Art Strikes under the general title: The Subsistence Level Standard Project 1984W, calls for an international and simultaneous event in the frame of Art Strike (1990-1993):

THE GENERAL ART STRIKE (MAY 1991) AND THE PERPETUUM MOBILE

One could add to the already existing model—



(one can't help but define oneself between the extremities)—
A new element—



These models—and others—are applicable and applied already by art strikers, artists, art theoreticians, art critics, art organizers, art dealers and the public for self-definition and consequently for the development of the Art-Strike-Dictionary which emerges inexorably in front of the awkward and corrupt Myth.

The participants should arrange the «General Art Strike (May 1991) and the Perpetuum Mobile» themselves and/or send their proposal to one or two or all these addresses before the end of April 1991. FRI-ART, Case Postale 354, 1701 Fribourg, Ch-Switzerland; tel. 037/23.23.51. INEXISTENT, Volk Straat 45, 2000 Antwerpen, B-Belgium; tel. 03/237.73.62. RUINE, 15 rue des Vollandes, 1207 Genève, Ch-Switzerland; tel. 022/736.60.37; fax 022/28.55.97. LIGET GALERIA, Agtosi Durer sor 5, H-Budapest XIV, Hungary.

Each proposal will be displayed in May 1991 and/or published by the organizers, and will be returned if requested.

Michel Ritter, FRI-ART
Chris Straetling, INEXISTENT
Tamas St. Auby, IPUT-RUINE

A GHOST WANDERS THE WORLD, THE GHOST OF THE STRIKE!

ESCHEW ISSUE

ART STRIKE SCABS!

CJ KID

ART STRIKE 1990-1993

ART STRIKE 1990-1993

WANTED SCABS! DISGUISED, ARMED IN ART AND CONSIDERED DANGEROUS! USA No.

USA Order No. TO COLLABORATE - PICK A SCAB - SIGN STAMP - REPRODUCE - DISTRIBUTE



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Cultural Workers in Support of YAWN

ASAC (United Kingdom), BM Senior, London WC1N 3XX, England
 Dharma Combat, P.O. Box 20593, Sun Valley, NV 89433
 Lang Thompson, P.O. Box 49604, Atlanta GA 30359
 Ben G. Price, 814 Chestnut St, Hagerstown MD 21740

