



# ABOUT ART STRIKE

*Stewart Home*

While the Art Strike was not conceived as a mail art project, many of the fifty or so individuals who have been engaged in propagating it have close ties with the Eternal Network. As such, Art Strike raises issues that are of pertinence to mail artists and points to ways international networking can be used to give voice to radical social perspectives.

## The Concept

The 1990 Art Strike was called as a means of encouraging critical debate around the concept of art.<sup>1</sup> While certain individuals will put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit or discuss their cultural work for a three-year period beginning on 1st January 1990, the numbers involved will be so small that the strike is unlikely to force the closure of any galleries or other art institutions. It will, however, demonstrate that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be aggressively challenged.

Art as a category must be distinguished from music, painting, writing, etc. Current usage of the term "art" treats it as a sub-category of these disciplines, one which differentiates between parts of them on the basis of *perceived values*. Thus, the music of John Cage is considered art, while that of Madonna is not. Therefore, when we use the term art we're invoking a distinction between different musics, paintings, works of fiction, etc., one which ranks the items to be found within these categories into a hierarchy.

Given the diversity of objects, texts, and compositions that are said to be art, it seems reasonable to conclude that

there is no common denominator among these art works that can be used as criteria for deciding what should or should not be considered art. What distinguishes the object is the particular set of social and institutional relationships that are to be found around it. Put another way, art is whatever those in a position of cultural power say is art.

One of the purposes of the Art Strike is to draw attention to the process by which works of art are legitimated. Those artists and administrators in the privileged position of deciding what is and what is not art constitute a specific faction of the ruling class. They promote art as a superior form of knowledge and simultaneously use it as a means of celebrating the *objective superiority* of their own way of life on the basis that they are committed to art. Appreciation of art is generally used as a mark of distinction, privilege and taste.

## The Precedents

There are innumerable ways I could discuss the Art Strike. This is an important point because one of the purposes of The Years Without Art is to bring into relief the means by which various mental sets and forms of discourse are legitimated and how individuals, objects, texts, etc., are situated within them. A brief outline of the various projects that have been labelled as Art Strikes follows.

The earliest use I've found of the term "Art Strike" is in Alain Jouffroy's essay "What's to be done about art?" (included in *Art and Confrontation*, New York Graphic Society, 1968):

**Figure 82.** (Left) *Stewart Home Performing Water Symphony*, England, 1989. A performance based on a three-part script by Stewart Home. The same photograph of Home appears in the Plagiarism Special of *Smile, Issue 11*, 1989. Photograph by David Tiffen.

...the abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an active art strike using the machines of the culture industry so that we can more effectively set it in total contradiction with itself. The intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adventurous part of 'artistic' production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques.

The problem with this proposal is that without ending the rule of production, avant-garde artists would simply swap one privileged role for another. Instead of providing entertainment for a *privileged* audience, artists are to form themselves into a vanguard providing ideas, forms and techniques for the *masses*. While such a role may be attractive to artists, it does nothing to alter the oppressive domination of a so called *creative* elite over the rest of society.

The New York Art Strike Against War, Repression and Racism was a coalition of artists, dealers, museum officials, and other members of the art community. Among other things, it called for a one-day closure of galleries and museums on May 22, 1970, with optional continuance for two weeks. On that day the Whitney, the Jewish Museum and a number of galleries closed, while the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum suspended their admission charges. While some of the aims of the New York Art Strike were laudable (such as protesting against the war in Vietnam), its supporters also used it as a vehicle for strengthening the privileged position artists occupy within contemporary society. However, the New York Art Strikers soon broke into dissenting factions, and their movement was moribund before the end of 1970.

The next proposal for an art strike came from Gustav Metzger. Writing in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Art Into Society/Society Into Art* (ICA, London, 1974), he called upon artists to support a three-year art

strike that would run between 1977 and 1980. The idea was to attack the way the art world was organized rather than to question the status of art; however, Metzger was unable to rally support for his plan, presumably because most artists lack any sense of mutual self-interest that would enable them to act in solidarity with others.

In February 1979, Goran Dordevic mailed a circular asking a variety of Yugoslavian and English-speaking artists if they would take part in an International Art Strike to protest against repression and the fact that artists were alienated from the fruits of their labour. Dordevic received forty replies of which the majority expressed doubts about the possibility of putting the International Art Strike into practice. Because so few artists were prepared to pledge their support, Dordevic abandoned his plan for an International Art Strike.

In Eastern Europe, where cultural work is totally professionalized, there have been successful strike actions by artists. During martial law in Poland artists refused to exhibit work in state galleries, leaving the ruling elite without an official culture. More recently, in Prague, 500 actors, theater managers and stage directors were among those who announced a week-long strike to protest state violence. Instead of giving performances, actors proposed to lead audiences in discussions of the situation (see "New Protest in Prague Follows Beating Death," *New York Times*, November 19, 1989). That artists are sometimes prepared to use their privileged position for what many would view as laudable ends, however, does not place them above criticism.

### Networking the 1990 Art Strike

The 1990 Art Strike was publicly announced in a flyer I issued during the summer of 1985. Further information appeared in issues of *Smile* magazine and a succession of

**Figure 83.** (Right) Stewart Home, *Smile Cover, No 10*, England

# SMILE

Issue 10 UK 60p US \$2 Smash The Imagination



**SEX WITHOUT SECRETIONS**

# We have people who check the people who check the people who check your *art strike*

(Karen Eliot)

**Figure 84.** Karen Eliot, *We Have People*, Germany. 1990(?) Notice issued by the Institute for Research in Neoism, Köln, W. Germany.

texts, flyers and pamphlets.<sup>2</sup> The idea was pumped by John Berndt in Baltimore and me in London. One of the earliest responses to our propaganda was a pack of "Give Up Art/ Save The Starving" stickers, badges, and balloons from Eire-based Tony Lowes.

The Art Strike virus spread as John, Tony and I energetically promoted the concept. And so, by the end of 1988, the idea had caused something of a stir in mail art and other circles, but we were still lacking an organizational form to implement the strike. At this point, Steve Perkins, Scott MacLeod, Aaron Noble and others, decided to form an Art Strike Action Committee (ASAC) in San Francisco. Fired by the initiative of these activists I formed a UK ASAC with Mark Pawson and James Mannon. Other ASACs soon sprang up in Baltimore, Eire, and Latin America.

January 1989 saw the California ASAC organize an Art Strike Mobilization Week in San Francisco. The UK and East Coast USA ASACs then attempted saturation leafleting of art institutions and artists' housing in London and Baltimore. This tactic worked effectively in Baltimore and led to the formation of an anti-Art Strike group. The larger more confident art community in London wasn't as easily intimidated. Provocative actions, such as leafleting a party to mark the closure of a gallery, led to earnest discussion rather than howls of outrage.

The year continued with propaganda posters made during the San Francisco Art Strike Mobilization Week being exhibited at two community art venues in London and then during the Fifth International Festival of Plagiarism in Glasgow. Lectures and debates were held in various art schools and institutes in both the UK and the US. All this activity caught the attention of the media, and ASAC representatives made appearances on national radio in both Britain and Eire. There was also a brief Art Strike feature on a London TV station. Written coverage of the Art Strike was more extensive, with features and news stories being carried in everything from underground magazines to the *New York Village Voice*.

## No Theoretical Summing Up

Since the Art Strike is located in opposition to closure, there can be no theoretical summing up of the issues involved; the time for theorizing the Art Strike will be after it has taken place.<sup>3</sup> Here and now, it is not possible to resolve the contradictions of a group of "militants" - many of whom do not consider themselves to be artists - "striking" against art. For the time being, the Art Strike must be understood simply as a propaganda tactic, as a means of raising the visibility and intensity of the class war within the cultural sphere.



1. For extensive documentation about Art Strike and Neoism read Stewart Home's *The Art Strike Papers and Neoist Manifestos*, Stirling, Scotland: AK Press, 1991.
2. The concepts of art and *Art Strike* are presented in Stewart Home's edition of *Art Strike Handbook*, London: Sabotage Editions, 1990.
3. Stewart Home broke his three years of silence on January 30, 1993 (Art Strike had ended) and before an audience at the Victoria and Albert Museum he read "Assessing the Art Strike 1990-1993." The following appears in his text, which was reprinted in Lloyd Dunn's March 1993, No 38 edition of *Yawn*: "During the summer of 1989, the underground was awash with Art Strike propaganda. By the end of the year, the Art Strike was receiving some mainstream media coverage—in the press, on TV and radio.

...I'd also made a name for myself, and going "on strike" at the beginning of 1990 represented a far greater sacrifice than when I'd first announced this moratorium on cultural production. It was this change in my circumstances that transformed what had initially been a ludic proposal into something more akin to a career move. Few of the fifty or so individuals who'd been most active in propagating the Art Strike took the proposal very seriously -- I was determined to see the project through to its conclusion -- and actually struck! I now appear to be the major force behind the Art Strike. Obviously, this obscures the fact that it took the collaboration of numerous other individuals to generate the interest and debate around the 1990 Art Strike that had not only validated a number of my own activities but also rescued Gustav Metzger's 1974 proposal from the complete oblivion which might otherwise have been its fate." (p. 1851)

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**Figure 85.** Crackerjack Kid, *Art Strike Mantra Audio Mail Art Chants*, U.S.A., 1991. Audio Collage. Mail artists from seven countries sent audio art that was later mixed and recorded by Thomas Dimuzio under the direction of Crackerjack Kid. Participants included: Guy Bleus, Art Monument, Jeff Bell, Allan Clark, Lisa Kucharshi, Benny L., ManWoman, Mogens Otto Nielsen, Michael Leigh, Hazel, Paul Jackson, Johanna Jackson, Barry Pilcher, MIT Mitropolous, Ruud Janssen, Seiei Nishimura, Reed Altemus, San Francisco Art Strike Action Committee, The Blotter, DeSirey Dodge Peace Post, FaGaGaGa, Arturo Fallico, Kevin Godsoe, John Held Jr., Jim Hlavacek, Kelley, Tom Loudin, Sally Mericle, Midnight, Mark Bloch, Peat O'Neill, Harry Pearson, JK Post, Frederico Rodriguez, Brian Salzberg, Ralf Schulze, Reid Wood, and Bill Whorrall