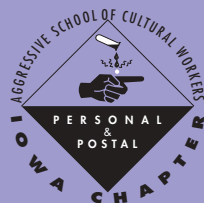


YAWN



March 1993

CRITIQUE OF CULTURE

Number 38

THE YEARS WITHOUT ART

ASSESSING THE ART STRIKE
1990 – 1993

*Stewart Home's Address to the Victoria & Albert Museum
London, England, January 30, 1993*

A STATIC OUTPUT PUBLICATION

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ART STRIKE

1990 – 1993

We call for all artists in the U.S. to put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit or discuss their work from January 1, 1990 to January 1, 1993. We call for all galleries, museums, agencies, alternative spaces, periodicals, theaters, art schools etc., to cease all operations for the same period.

Art is conceptually defined by a self-perpetuating elite and is marketed as an international commodity; the activity of its production has been mystified and co-opted; its practitioners have become manipulable and/or marginalized through self-identification with the term "artist" and all it implies.

To call one person an artist is to deny another an equal gift of vision; thus the myth of "genius" becomes an ideological justification for inequality, repression and famine. What an artist considers to be his or her identity is a schooled set of attitudes; preconceptions which imprison humanity in history. It is the roles derived from these identities, as much as the art products mined from this reification, which we must reject.

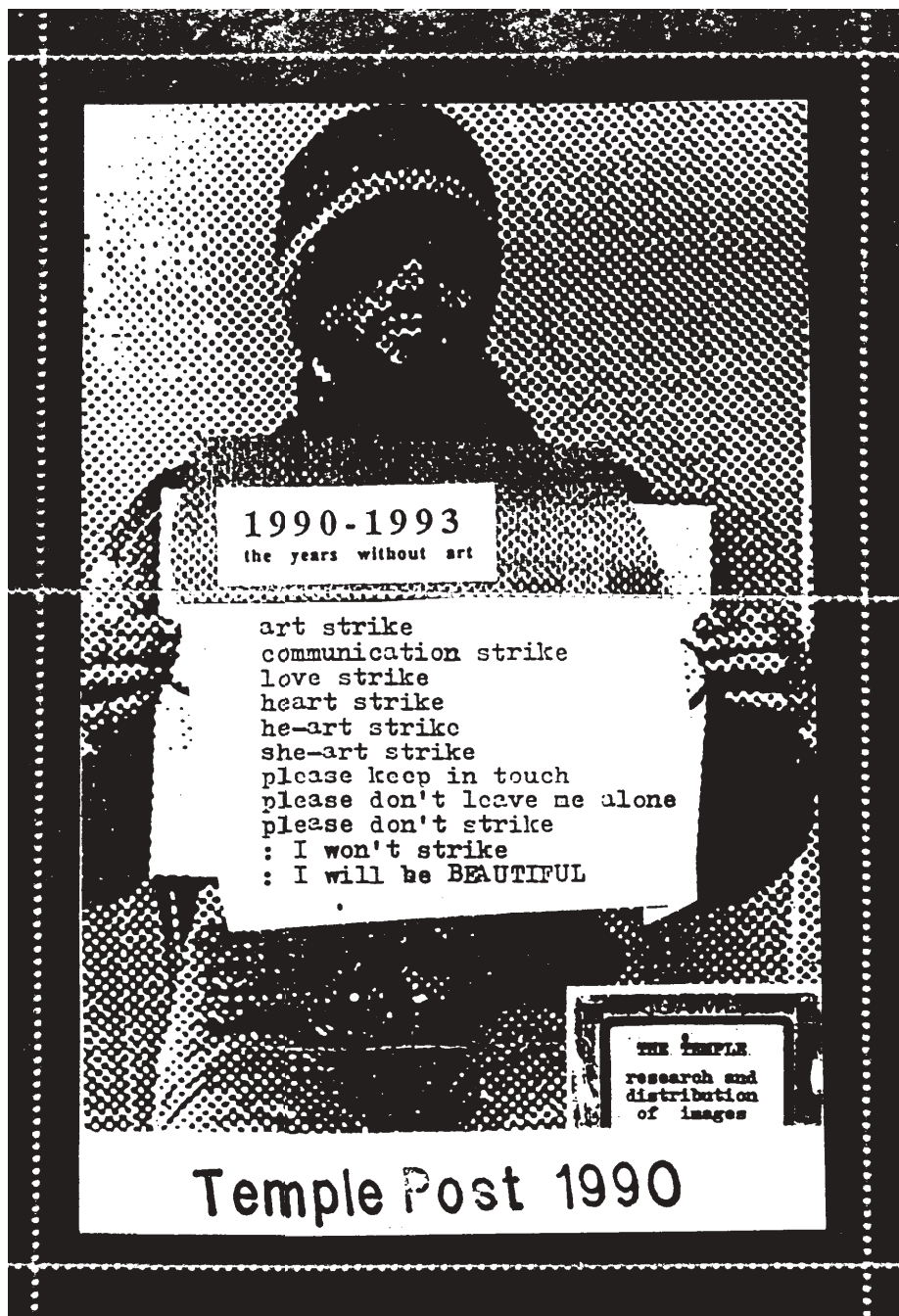
Unlike Gustav Metzger's Art Strike of 1977 to 1980, the purpose is not to destroy those institutions which might be perceived as having a negative effect on artistic production. Instead, we intend to question the role of the artist itself and its relation to the dynamics of power within our specific culture.

Everybody knows what's wrong

We call this Art Strike because, like any general strike, the real reasons being discussed are ones of economics and self-determination. We call this Art Strike in order to make explicit the political and ethical motivations for this attempted large-scale manipulation of alleged "esthetic" objects and relationships. We call this Art Strike to connote and encourage active rather than passive engagement with the issues at hand.

GET IT OUT OF YOUR SYSTEM

Art Strike will fail for many reasons, not the least of which is that it's a bad idea. But Art Strike raises a number of questions worth asking. Is there an attitude inherent in self-identification as an "artist" which implies that art-making is in itself a sufficient response to cultural issues? Is there an implication that the "artist" identity somehow absolves one from responsibility for cultural conditions? What are the possibilities for real engagement? This is not meant primarily as a critique of "art for art's sake" but rather as a critique of the perception that a class of artists exists as an independent social class. What are the priorities of the people who are calling for Art Strike? Does Art Strike, as a method for prompting dialogue concerning issues of personal productivity, commodity dynamics and cultural identity, conflict with the needs and priorities of artists who identify themselves primarily as feminists, hispanics, blacks, gays, etc.? Is Art Strike in any form a good idea?



Such acts of desperation were common in the Mail Art Network during the Years without Art.

ASSESSING THE ART STRIKE 1990-1993

NOTES FROM A TALK
GIVEN BY STEWART HOME
AT THE VICTORIA & ALBERT
MUSEUM, LONDON, ENGLAND
30 JANUARY 1993

THERE ARE MANY WAYS in which it's possible to deal with the Art Strike. For instance, it's been explained as a conceptual art piece consisting of all the propaganda calling on cultural workers to stop making or discussing their work from January 1, 1990, to January 1, 1993 — along with the various responses with which the demand has been met. It will become clear during the course of this talk that I don't concur with this view, because in my opinion, the Art Strike would not have generated so much publicity or confusion if it had been produced as an art work.

Early in 1989, a year before the Art Strike began, I wrote that, "the time for theorising the Art Strike will be after it has taken place." This statement was one of a number grouped under the heading "No Theoretical Summing Up" (SEE BOX, p. 1844). Like the Art Strike, at first glance these words appear to be little more than a flat refusal to engage in a discourse that might be of value to the culture industry. However, both this statement — and the Art Strike in general — work on more than one level. In the case of the fourteen words I've chosen to cite, taken in context, they also point towards a rather unoriginal view of history as something created after the fact by academics sitting amongst dusty piles of books — rather than by the Napoleons and Bismarks who are familiar to us from dimly remembered school lessons. I'm digressing, and that's highly appropriate considering that I've stated on more than one occasion that the Art Strike was located in opposition to closure.

You've probably gathered by now that I'm unwilling to nail the Art Strike down.

I've no wish to provide some monolithic theoretical justification for the Art Strike now that it's taken place. There's no simple explanation of what the Art Strike was about because it was simultaneously a hammer blow delivered to the heart of the cultural establishment and a very clever career move. After looking through the

There's no simple explanation of what the Art Strike was about because it was simultaneously a hammer blow delivered to the heart of the cultural establishment and a very clever career move.

boxes of Art Strike material that have been gathering dust in my flat, I know that it's impossible to do justice to the omnidirectional nature of the Art Strike in the time it will take to deliver this lecture.

In an attempt to trace the genesis of the Art Strike, I'm going to backtrack to 1982. I was twenty years old and wanted to put life back into the corpse of the revolutionary avant garde. I was determined to create a Frankenstein's monster that would destroy the humourless

cliques I used to run into who talked about Surrealism as "unfinished business" and the Situationist International as having produced "the ultimate anti-capitalist critique."

Fortunately, I'd already hit upon plagiarism as a technique with which to antagonise my adversaries. I didn't need any ideas of my own, all I had to do was

NO THEORETICAL SUMMING UP

The Art Strike is located against closure, and yet, from an "individualist perspective," it has numerous parallels with the "final closure" of "death." Those who adopt art as a substitute for life will necessarily experience the Art Strike as a form of "death"; whereas communarians, who recognise the productive role played by the "audience" within the cultural sphere, view the refusal of creativity as a means of opening up culture (and the mechanics of its production). Communists understand that "death," like "art" and "individuality," is the product of bourgeois ideology.

Since the Art Strike is so clearly located in opposition to closure (as well as philosophy, "death," etc.), there can be no theoretical summing up of the issues involved; the time for theorising the Art Strike will be after it has taken place. 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.

[Stewart Home, *Art Strike Handbook*, London, 1989; reprinted in YAWN no. 36]

plunder the past. The first thing I came up with had a pedigree that goes back at least as far as the Berlin Dadaists — who'd declared that anyone who paid them fifty marks could be Jesus Christ. A more recent twist on the same theme is found in Julian Temple's film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, which features a scene that sets out to prove that "anybody can be a Sex Pistol." I decided to enter the fray by issuing a series of leaflets which simultaneously demanded that all rock bands call themselves White Colours and that plagiarism should be adopted as a creative technique.

Two years later, I ran into various members of the Neoist Network and discovered that back in 1977, David Zack had issued a call for interested parties to assume the identity of an "open pop star" named Monty Cantsin. Zack figured that if enough people used the name, this fictitious character would quickly develop a huge following and anybody who wanted a ready-made audience for their music would be able to find one simply by billing themselves a Monty Cantsin. Since I'd been working along similar lines, I decided to throw in my lot with the Neoists. The younger members of the group were very receptive to "my" ideas about plagiarism. Older Neoists such as Pete Horobin and TENTATIVELY, a CONVENIENCE were more interested in inventing some new universal language. However, only R.U. Sevol and Istvan Kantor were openly hostile. Kantor soon changed his tune but the first time I met him, he ranted and raved about a statement I'd made claiming Lautréamont as a plagiarist when he considered it self-evident that the author of *Maldoror* was "an original."

Neoism was rooted in fluxus, Mail Art and Punk. I was able to transform the movement by grafting on a direct link to the Situationist tradition. Much of this simply consisted of providing a "radical" theoretical underpinning to the group's post-fluxus activities (by blatantly plagiarising situationist texts) — alongside a vigorous use of plagiarism and the Monty Cantsin identity. Teenagers coming into the movement, such as John Berndt and Graf Haufen, took up these ideas and as a result Neoism entered the final of its four phases. Critics have often treated this final period as if it was characteristic of the entire history of Neoism — in fact, there are vast differences between the early period in Portland when Zack and Al Ackerman* invented the movement, the activist phase of the Montreal group in 1979–80, the movement that then spread across the Western World and its final transformation in my hands in 1984.

By April, 1985, I was feeling frustrated. Neoism was a dead end. As a vehicle for "my" ideas, this particular movement had taken them as far as they'd go in Neo-

*See "Origins of Neoism Illuminated," by Al Ackerman in *PhotoStatic Magazine* no. 38, October, 1989, p. 1415.

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~~The Questionable Memory~~

~~in the classroom. And hanging over all of us is the threat of universal destruction which, perhaps, is one cause of our sense of despair with ourselves and one cause for the withdrawal that we feel from the personal, the emotional, the poetic in each of us.~~

~~As poets, this is the problem I raise for myself. And so what is the point of poetry? The point, first of all, I guess, is to stay alive in such an atmosphere and to understand it. Otherwise, we cannot get to the bottom of our unhappiness. If anything can make us curious and wish to know, it is this special unhappiness, such as I feel now. I am curious to find out what it means to be a poet in these days requiring the sacrifice of one's identity to merely survive. We feel the change to that status coming on us and through us with, it seems, the speed of light. We think of what we once securely knew and loved, appreciated, and lived by as becoming a back number to living. That which we gathered to ourselves as our identity in things, persons, ideas, and feelings, feelings especially, we find losing credibility in our own eyes as the circumstances that made our identity possible are withdrawn from beneath our very feet, not by our doing but by others' and by more powerful circumstances than our private worlds.~~

~~Well, the poet who is there with you in all these unhappy, gloomy conditions, asks himself, too, what am I going? What am I doing here? Am I going to find myself somewhere new? Apparently, I am alive, but how about living in some kind of peace and order? Am I surviving there? Will I survive there? Is all this movement meant to get me there? And these questions are not necessarily thought by poets only. These are questions we all ask ourselves and because they are not unique to poets, it becomes the duty and the joy of poets, feeling as one with others, to make of these questions the point of writing their poems. Writing poetry has this compelling motivation. It is to take the world as it comes at you and give it an order of comprehension that is the poem itself. It is to make the world a poem of itself for each of us who still believes himself or herself to be an individual. Let me present one of my poems to this point.~~

Visual poet John Stickney gets right to the point by asking what the point is.

Dadaist clothing. This led me to make two important decisions — to end my involvement with Neoism and to plagiarise Gustav Metzger's 1974 proposal for an Art Strike. These two decisions were closely related. The Neoist movement had acquired so much historical baggage during the course of its development that the issues raised by the Art Strike would have been ignored by virtually everyone outside the group if this moratorium on the production of culture had been proclaimed under the ægis of Neoism. Although it was the last thing Dave Zack, Al Ackerman and Maris Kundzin intended when they founded the group, Neoism had become a self-consciously avant-garde movement and its intolerant attitude towards less rigorous sections of the cultural underground resulted in many individuals rejecting Neoist activities without actually giving them any serious consideration. Meanwhile, the Art Strike tied in very neatly with the interest I'd retained in plagiarism and collective pseudonyms — providing me with an opportunity to develop all three concepts. In fact, they quickly became so intertwined that it's become very difficult to talk about any one of them without referring to the other two — hence the need that will be encountered at various points in this talk for digressions on these intimately related subjects.

It's been suggested by a number of people that the Art Strike was simply a career move and/or a publicity stunt on my part. To treat the Art Strike like this is ludicrous because as a cultural phenomenon it was anything but stable and static. In fact, the Art Strike went through several periods of uneven but dynamic development. One of the initial attractions the Art Strike held for me was that it placed a strict time limit on my post-Neoist activities. By propagating the interlinked concepts of plagiarism, multiple names and Art Strike (as a means of questioning Western notions of

Neoism had become a self-consciously avant-garde movement and its intolerant attitude towards less rigorous sections of the cultural underground resulted in many individuals rejecting Neoist activities without actually giving them any serious consideration.

NEOISM

ART STRIKE

1977 – 1980

Artists engaged in political struggle act in two key areas: the use of their art for direct social change; and actions to change the structures of the art world. It needs to be understood that this activity is necessarily of a reformist, rather than revolutionary, character. Indeed this political activity often serves to consolidate the existing order, in the West, and in the East.

The use of art for social change is bedevilled by the close integration of art and society. The state supports art, it needs art as a cosmetic cloak to its horrifying reality, and uses art to confuse, divert and entertain large numbers of people. Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose the umbilical cord of the state. Art in the service of revolution is unsatisfactory and mistrusted because of the numerous links of art with the state and capitalism. Despite these problems, artists will go on using art to change society.

Throughout the century, artists have attacked the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art. These attacks on the organisation of the art world have gained momentum in recent years. This struggle, aimed at the destruction of existing commercial and public marketing and patronage systems, can be brought to a successful conclusion in the course of the present decade.

The refusal to labour is the chief weapon of workers fighting the system; artists can use the same weapon. To bring down the art system it is necessary to call for years without art, a period of three years — 1977 to 1980 — when artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibitions, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art world. This total withdrawal of labor is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state. The years without art will see the collapse of many private galleries. Museums and cultural institutions handling contemporary art will be severely hit, suffer loss of funds, and will have to reduce their staff. National and local government institutions will be in serious trouble. Art magazines will fold. The international ramifications of the dealer/museum/publicity complex make for vulnerability; it is a system that is keyed to a continuous juggling of artists, finance, works and information — damage one part, and the effect is felt world-wide.

Three years is the minimum period required to cripple the system, whilst a longer period of time would create difficulties for artists. The very small number of artists who live from the practice of art are sufficiently wealthy to live on their capital for three years. The vast majority of people who produce art have to subsidise their work by other means; they will, in fact, be saving money and time. Most people who practice art never sell their work at a profit, do not get the chance to exhibit their work under proper conditions, and are unmentioned by the publicity organs. Some artist may find it difficult to restrain themselves from producing art. These artist will be invited to enter camps, where making of art works is forbidden, and where any work produced is destroyed at regular intervals. In place of the practice of art, people can spend time on the numerous historical, esthetic and social issues facing art. It will be necessary to construct more equitable forms for marketing, exhibiting and publicising art in the future. As the twentieth century has progressed, capitalism has smothered art — the deep surgery of the years without art will give it a new chance.— Gustav Metzger, 1974

individuality, value and truth) I was able to resurrect the corpse of the revolutionary avant garde — and then kill it off again after four and a half years.

The earliest propaganda I produced to promote the 1990 Art Strike was a straight plagiarism of Gustav Metzger's 1974 proposal with the dates changed from 1977–1980 to 1990–1993. However, since the 1977 Art Strike had been a complete flop, it was clear to me that I'd have to be more energetic than Metzger in promoting the concept. I began talking about the Art Strike as a "refusal of creativity" and an act of class war carrying on within the cultural sphere, as well as linking it to my use of plagiarism and multiple names. One of the major outlets for this propaganda was *Smile*, a magazine I'd founded in February 1984. Prior to making contact with the Neoists, I'd already been demanding that all magazines be called *Smile*. The early issues were produced with a typewriter. After my break with Neoism, the magazine became much smarter looking, with a glossy two-colour cover and the text properly typeset.

At first I made little headway with the Art Strike; only John Berndt and Tony Lowes seemed interested in the idea. Perhaps the difficulties I encountered were partly due to the fact that despite the break I'd made, many people still associated my activities with Neoism. More important still was the collage structure of *Smile*, which tended to overshadow its content. Thus the number of individuals producing periodicals with that title multiplied because the cold, aggressive and apparently logical structure of my journal was undoubtedly impressive — but dazzled by the magazine's sense of style, the majority of readers either failed to take in or misunderstood what I was saying. I should perhaps at this point admit that this state of affairs was largely planned and had, in fact, become an integral part of my activities. As the style magazine *Blitz* commented in October, 1986, "Literary penetrability has never been high up *Smile's* list of priorities."

The mere existence of *Smile* enabled me to develop the multiple name concept but had the simultaneous effect of overshadowing my plagiarism and Art Strike projects. To rectify this situation, I set about organising a Festival of Plagiarism in London. Rather than simply participate in the event I'd organised, various individuals in the States decided to set up Festivals of their own. Thus, in January, 1988, there were simultaneous Festivals of Plagiarism in London, San Francisco, and Madison, Wisconsin. These were followed up with further events in Branschweig, Germany, and Glasgow, Scotland. As a result, the underground of Europe and the United States was flooded with plagiarist propaganda.

The various Festivals of Plagiarism were radically different from any of the Neoist Apartment Festivals and established to the satisfaction of most of those active in the cultural underground that I'd made a complete break with Neoism. More importantly, the organisers of the San Francisco Festival of Plagiarism were so pleased with



SEX WITHOUT SECRECTIONS

the success of their event, that they decided to focus on the Art Strike as their next major project. Thus they organised an Art Strike Mobilization Week at the Artists' Television Access Gallery in January, 1989, and formed the first Art Strike Action Committee (ASAC). Further Action Committees were quickly set up in London, Eire and Baltimore, Maryland.

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 succeeded in making a reasonably large number of people reflect on the political implications of cultural production and infuriated a good many reactionaries who believed that rather than being a dull sham, art gave expression to so-called "spiritual values." In the process of doing this, 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. Although a very 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! As a result, 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.

Given the number of scabs who ignored the 1990–1993 moratorium of cultural production, it's perhaps extraordinary that I can report the Art Strike in the same triumphal fashion that the Situationist International wrote about the events of May,

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.

1968. After the boom years of the late eighties, many galleries shut down long before the deep surgery of the years without art had resulted in the plug being pulled on the patient's life-support system. In an article entitled "The Sinking of Cork Street," the *Guardian* reported on 29 May 1992 that: "In the past two years one in four of the major galleries in the West End have closed due to ... a shrinking market," and that there had been "... a reported sixty percent drop in art sales." The news that the art world was collapsing shouldn't have escaped any regular reader of the press, some other morale-boosting headlines included: DEALERS FEEL PINCH AS SLUMP HITS ART (*Guardian*, June 1991) and YOU ARE INVITED TO AN ART WORLD WAKE (*Independent*, 10 October 1992) — while the 1993 New Year issue of *Time Out* reported the following gallery closures in its review of the previous twelve months: Anne Berthoud, Albemarle, Nicola Jacobs, Fabian Carlsson, Odette Gilbert, Maureen Paley, Milch and Nigel Greenwood. Obviously, the recession played a role in creating this pleasant state of affairs — but that needn't prevent me from claiming that the psychological impact of the Art Strike was largely responsible for this cultural crisis. Art Strike propaganda made it clear that simply challenging the implicit assumptions of serious culture would go a long way towards destroying its hegemony.

The three-year period of the Art Strike also saw the world of serious fiction decimated, with a *Times* headline of 6 February 1992 announcing the BURIAL RATES OF THE HARDBACK. Likewise, in his *Independent On Sunday* books review of the year 1992, Blake Morrison bemoaned the fact that unlike a decade ago, it was no longer possible to make a list of the best twenty young British novelists — he could only think of four and failed to add that the bozos he picked will soon have been forgotten. Other good news from the publishing industry included the suicide of literary hack Richard Burns, who hanged himself on 31 August 1992. Ian Katz in an article entitled "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," (*Guardian*, 14 December 1992) quotes Robert Winder, literary editor of the *Independent*, as saying, "He had a new book about to come out. I wonder whether he sat down and read it and suddenly thought ... I'm not Saul Bellow." One assumes such a realisation would be a cause for celebration — and so it seems likely that Burns topped himself because the Art Strike shattered the hegemony of his elitist world view. The factor Winder highlights simply isn't credible — at least not to anyone who's not a member of that mythical society, the literary mafia.

It hardly needs stating that 1992 was by far and away the best year of the Art Strike, as the obituary columns of the international press listed the deaths of numerous proponents of serious culture — including Francis Bacon, John Cage, George MacBeth and John Piper. Although not quite so directly related to my Art Strike campaign, I was equally pleased to hear the Friedrich von Hayek and David

Widgery had snuffed it. Of course, it's impossible to measure the impact of Art Strike propaganda on those who are now dead — but hopefully it hammered a few nails into the coffins of these hacks.

However, the Art Strike was more than simply an attack on high culture and at the beginning of the three-year moratorium on cultural production, I not only ceased writing, producing graphics, organising events and playing the guitar — I also stopped promoting the Art Strike. As it turned out, there were other individuals — such as Lloyd Dunn in Iowa — who were very active in keeping the Art Strike alive as an issue of debate within the underground. Likewise, old Art Strike materials were still in circulation and thousands of people were exposed to them for the first time long after they'd passed out of my hands. In itself, this illustrates the long delays involved in the distribution of cultural products and ideas — and since I'd decided to allow all the materials I'd created prior to 1 January 1990 to circulate during the Art Strike, I'm now able to provide still further models of this process.

For example, on 12 December 1989, I finished work on a novel entitled *Defiant Pose*. However, the book wasn't published until June 1991, eighteen months after it was completed and nearly a year and three quarters since I'd started work on it. The fact that *Defiant Pose* made books of the year lists in *The Face* and *Gay Times*

DEMOLISH SERIOUS CULTURE

When the PRAXIS group declared their intention to organize an Art Strike for the three-year period 1990–1993, they fully intended that this proposed (in)action would create at least as many problems as it resolved.

The importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but in the possibilities it opens up for intensifying the war between the classes. The Art Strike addresses a series of issues: most important among these is the fact that the socially imposed hierarchy of the arts can be actively and aggressively challenged. Simply making this challenge goes a considerable way towards dismantling the mental set behind art and undermining its position of hegemony within contemporary culture, since the success of art as a supposedly "superior form of knowledge" largely depends upon its status remaining unquestioned.

Other issues with which the Art Strike is concerned include that series of "problems" centered on the question of "identity." By focusing attention on the identity of the artist, and the social and administrative practices an individual must pass through before such an identity becomes generally recognized, the organizers of the Art Strike intend to demonstrate that within this society there is a general drift away from the pleasure of play and stimulation; a drift which leads, via codification, on into the prison of the "real."

[Stewart Home, *Art Strike Handbook*, London, 1989; reprinted in YAWN no. 5

SMILE

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Issue 8



SMILE BACK AT THE RULING CLASS

of December 1991, and the best of the worst in the *Sunday Times* review of the literary year, amply reflects the fact that none of the works chosen were written during the twelve months in question. Therefore, the Art Strike can be read as my way of giving critics a chance to catch up with what I'd been doing during the eighties. And not only critics! The Art Strike also gave cultural administrators the opportunity to get to grips with my work. The last time I gave a public lecture was in December 1989, like this talk that one was also on the Art Strike — but my speech of three years ago was given at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, whereas today I've been booked into the more prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum. Individual reputations very rarely stand still in the cultural world and the Art Strike proves that doing nothing is often more productive than desperately seeking fame and fortune.

At this point, I'd like to backtrack to my books. My first novel, *Pure Mania*, was originally scheduled for publication in May 1989 — but due to various disputes between the imprint I was dealing with and their parent company, didn't actually see the light of day until December 1989. Although I did some publicity for the book, once I hit my January 1st deadline, I refused to do any more interviews. The offers I turned down included the opportunity to appear on the Jonathan Ross Show — which should be an indication of how seriously I took the Art Strike. Accepting these invitations would have done a lot more for my career than

being one of two participants in a three-year Art Strike. After the journal *Square Peg* ran a competition in which participants had to submit fake interviews with me, I thought I should respond to the challenge — and so when my second novel was published in June 1991, I sent other people along to do interviews for me. This didn't work out very well, since all the journalists concerned realised they were being duped — and in the end, I returned to flatly refusing to do interviews or personal appearances.

There was a ludic quality to turning down publicity opportunities and remunerative offers of work — the disbelief with which my refusals were met more than compensated me for the fact that I was passing up the possibility of fame and fortune. For a time, it even seemed likely that I'd become famous without actually

The Art Strike was an organised myth that took hold of individual artists and encircled them, sapping the will and creating a sensation of helplessness.... What the Art Strike made clear is that artistic activities have no social value whatsoever and in fact are extremely wasteful.

producing any further work of my own — because a number of individuals were issuing text supposedly written by Stewart Home, in an attempt to discredit the Art Strike. The industrial rock band Academy 23 did this most successfully by producing a magazine entitled *Smile*, allegedly in collaboration with me. Unfortunately, they cocked up by admitting in a 1992 interview that they hadn't seen me since 1985 and had no idea where I was living. Other individuals — such as Mark Bloch with his *Last Word* pamphlet — tried and failed to bait me into print by publishing blatant lies about certain of my activities during the eighties.

As I've already said, I'm not interested in theorising the Art Strike. I'll leave it to my critics to sort out the mess I created with the help of some friends. And there's an awful lot that requires elucidation — from the various ways in which I plundered the past, through to the influence of my activities on the KLF (Kopyright Liberation Front) rock band and Michael Bogdanov, founder of the English Shakespeare Company, who the *Independent On Sunday* of 3 January 1993 reported as calling for a twenty-year moratorium on the production of plays by the bard. As Sadie Plant wrote in her book *The Most Radical Gesture*, (Routledge, London and New York, 1992): "Carrying a provocative ambiguity which incited confusion, the Art Strike reintroduced a whole range of issues centred around questions of strategy, recuperation, and the relation between culture and politics."

To quote from Plant's book should help clarify a statement I made at the beginning of 1989, to the effect that the Art Strike "should be understood in terms of social psychology, as intuitive mental pictures, rather than actions which have been rationally theorised." Somewhat like Sorel's conception of the General Strike, the Art Strike should be viewed as a myth that drove (wo)men to (in)action. The Art Strike was an organised myth that took hold of individual artists and encircled them, sapping the will and creating a sensation of helplessness. As was observed in some Art Strike propaganda, most artists appear to be nervous about what they do

and feel anxious as to whether they perform a socially useful function. What the Art Strike made clear is that artistic activities have no social value whatsoever and in fact are extremely wasteful. The recent collapse of Cork Street indicates that the number of individuals immobilised by the Art Strike was even greater than those who felt severely threatened by it and reacted with violent denunciation. We can therefore conclude that as propaganda and myth, the Art Strike was a great success.

— Stewart Home, January 1993



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CRITIQUE OF INTERNATIONAL NEOISM

The origins of Neoism lie as far back in the history of art as anyone can be bothered to trace them. In this case futurism seems as good a place to start as any. Indeed the very word Neoism strikes one as a cheapening through realisation of the futurist project. What was projected as the future is merely new upon its realisation. Indeed both futurism and Neoism were so obsessed with the idea of progress that they failed to realise that what they heralded was already praxis.

The parallels between Neoism and futurism are striking but it was dada, surrealism and fluxus that provided the historical models upon which the Neoists based their movement.

The decisive event in the formation of the Neoist Movement occurred in 1976 when Dave Zack, a not particularly successful art critic, met Istvan Kantor in Budapest. Kantor was a moderately accomplished musician with pretensions about being an "artist." Zack saw Kantor as having the potential to become Monty Cantsin, a character he created whose role could, in theory, be fulfilled by anyone. Kantor was not to be the sole Monty Cantsin but one of a number. Zack persuaded Kantor to defect to the West. Kantor left Hungary several months later on a student visa to study in Paris.

On Zack's advice Kantor then emigrated to Canada, arriving in Montreal in September 1977. In 1978 Kantor went to Portland, Oregon, where Zack and the mail artist Al Ackerman fed him with ideas to use in his role as Monty Cantsin. Kantor returned to Montreal right at the beginning of 1979 and immediately began making an artistic reputation for himself using the name Monty Cantsin.

This first thing Kantor did on his return was gather a group of Montreal youth around him and fashion a collective identity for them as the Neoists. Kantor ingratiated himself with the organisers of the "Brain In The Mail" show to be held at the Vehicule Art in Montreal and eventually managed to gain a lot of undeserved credit for the exhibition's success. The birth of Neoism is usually dated from 14 February 1979, the day on which Kantor did a "postal art performance" to mark the opening of the show.

Subsequent Neoist activity centred around a graffiti campaign, street actions, public interventions and a number of individual works all of which were executed with the intention of receiving scandalised press coverage. These actions are typified by the "Blood Campaign," a series of events in which Kantor had his blood taken by a nurse and then used it in a performance. The most important of these events were the "Red Supper" held at Vehicule Art, Montreal, on 30 June 1979, and the "Hallowmass and Supper," held at the Motivation 5 Gallery on 31 October 1979. There were a number of other "suppers" in which the food motif played an important part. The use of this motif was lifted directly from fluxus, most obviously in the form of the Fluxfeasts.

Other important elements in Neoist activity during this period were the use of music, predominantly new wave, and the use of technology in the form of video. In October 1980 there was a five-day "occupation" of Motivation 5 during which a two-way video communication link was established between the two floors of the gallery. Kantor wrote of the event, "Video conversations eventually developed into an automatic exchange of

conceptual ideas, video became reality and reality became video, simultaneously."

Emphasis should be placed on the words "automatic exchange." Communication has become totalitarian. What one thinks and accepts has become automatic, there is no time for reflection or differences of opinion. For there to be an "automatic exchange of conceptual ideas" there must be a single ideology to bind them together, an ideology from which it is impossible to deviate. The Neoists assume this is "good" because it is "new." Critical reflection has been replaced by the cult of the new for its own sake.

When Kantor tells us that the first time he got a video camera he used it to watch himself masturbating and making love he seems completely unaware of the gap opened up between spectacle and life. He seems unaware that he is passively watching an image of himself rather than experiencing the event directly. When he sent out post cards bearing the message "I want to die in the TV," he failed to realise that he was already dead.

When Kantor wails, "I refuse to leave technology in the hands of those who control it for their own profit," he fails to consider that the problems of modern society may not be overcome simply by changing the personnel who control technology. In his celebrations of technology he fails to consider that it may be necessary to change the uses to which we put it in order to overcome some of the complex problems facing us today. Similarly in his use of the word "revolution," Kantor fails to realise that it no longer means political change and become instead a metaphor for the failings of his own lucidity.

Neoism spread rapidly throughout North America and Europe precisely because its failings match those of the average artist, that is the inability to grasp their own intellectual impotency. And if Neoist actions and ideas often seem remarkably similar to those of industrial music and culture then that is hardly surprising. After all, Genesis P-Orridge, like Kantor, had his head filled with ideas by Al Ackerman and stole working methods unashamedly from fluxus.

—Stewart Home, from *Smile* no. 8

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