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The Refusal of Art
1989

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Art abstracts from life. Abstraction is deletion. When the first artist painted an aurochs on a cave wall, the first critic saw it and said, "That's an aurochs!" But it wasn't an aurochs, it was a painting. It's been downhill for art criticism ever since. Art, like science, is illumination through elimination. Artists remove in order to improve. In this sense, minimalism is not just another school of art, but its evolving essence, and all of modern art can be seen as a process of progressive self-destruction. Artists often destroy themselves, occasionally each other, but it was left to a relatively unknown German artist, Gustav Metzger, to give this artistic impulse its most succinct articulation when in 1959 he announced his theory of "auto-destructive art." It's not surprising, then, that Metzger also anticipated the proposed Art Strike 1990 — 1993.

On January 1, 1990 — if they comply with the directives of the PRAXIS Group — all artists will put down their tools for three years. There will be no openings, no showings, no readings. "Cultural workers," unless they scab, will also walk out. Galleries, museums, and "alternative" spaces will all shut down or be converted to serve more practical purposes. According to the Art Strike leadership, everybody benefits. The artists, by

stepping out from under their burden of specialized creativity, get not only a breather but a chance to get a life. And the plebeian masses, no longer cowed by "talented bullies," are in turn expected to rush into art like fresh air into a vacuum.

Although appearing at first as the suppression of art, the Art Strike is in essence its realization — the ultimate work of art, the culmination of its *telos*. In the Art Strike, artistic abnegation achieves its final expression: art, having become nothing, becomes everything. If art is what artists *don't* do, what *isn't* art now? The Art Strike thus becomes an exercise in imperialism. After all, everyone else has been on an Art Strike all along. With the Art Strike, the leaders are given a chance to catch up with their followers, who weren't previously aware they *had* leaders, let alone needed any.

Ostentatious renunciation is greed in its most warped and insidious form. By their noisy refusal of art, the Art Strikers affirm its importance and thus their own, not unlike alcoholics whose AA meetings testify to the power of the drug and thus to their own power in collectively renouncing it. But there the analogy ends. The Art Strikers liken their strike to the syndicalist General Strike so as to appropriate the glamor of this obsolete tactic. But a Particular Strike is not a General Strike; and the Art Strike, since it doesn't include the refusal of work by waged or salaried work- ers (artists being generally self-employed freelancers or independent contractors), is not a strike at all.

What remains after artists forswear art? Artists, of course. The Art Strike magnifies the importance of artists even as it eliminates their toil. Disencumbered of the obligation to create, the artist no longer must try to inform or agitate or even entertain. All pretense to being useful to other people can be dropped. But that's not to say artists are about to disappear into the crowd — if they did, nobody would ever notice there even *was* an Art Strike. No, artists must instead make a production out of their refusal to produce, they must clamor for attention

over what they don't do, even though their credentials for inactivity are precisely their previous art. This is what makes the refusal of art elitist. The Art Strike is a vanguardist notion: only artists can refuse art, an only artists can flatter themselves that *they* stand in the way of an outburst of popular creativity.

Actually, the reason the hoi-poloi don't create art is not because they're intimidated by "talented bullies," but because their creative power has been so suppressed — above all, by work — that they devote their leisure hours to consumption not creation. School, work, the family, religion, rightism and leftism — these thwart creativity. The sort of "art" created by the Art Strike leadership, its various predictions and pronouncements, is much more opaque to the proles than the representational art of pre-modern times, and no less so than modern art, which is too remote from everyday experience for anybody to be bullied by it, unless by its reputation, which, of course, will grow during the Years Without Art.

Art Strike theorists are ambiguous about the scope of the strike. If it represents the refusal of "creativity" by specialists, it is only for artists. But if the Art Strike seeks to close down museums, libraries, and galleries, it must include the workers for whom it would then be a real strike, the employees of the cultural apparatus unable to refuse their creativity since nobody has ever called for it in the first place. The janitor would as soon mop up the museum as a nuclear power plant, especially since the activist intellectuals will hound him out of there too if they can. Such workers already know firsthand what artists require outlandish antics to comprehend — working for the cultural industry is still working. Only for the artist is the Art Strike a work of art. Others who get involved would be but the paint the striking artists apply to the canvas, props in a performance-art piece. Human lives and livelihoods as the stuff of art… What artist in his or her deepest inwardness hasn't longed to echo Nero's cry, *What an artist dies in me!*

Since the Years Without Income hold no appeal for the art industry proletariat *or* its bureaucracy, they will no doubt remain on the job. The impact of the strike will be very uneven. Curators and librarians will be glad to be rid of the hardest part of their task — keeping abreast of new artworks and conjecturing which ones will pass the test of time. Art has been piling up since before the Bronze Age; three years will not be time enough to reassess and rearrange and redistribute the existing inventory. Still, budget pressures may ease. Music, already all but completely given over to "classic hits," will be living in the past too. In lieu of live music, disco will come back — it pretty much already has. Most people watch TV, not stage plays; now everybody will. Are the artists going on strike so that, after three years we beg them to come back? If theirs was a place of privilege before, how high then will their seat be in 1993? The real inspiration for the Art Strike is not, as is pretended, the general strike of the proletariat, but rather something already depicted in a work of *art* — the general strike of the capitalists in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

But artists won't have to wait three years to profit from the Art Strike. Returns will be immediate and they will increase like compound interest. The Art Strike cunningly acts upon supply, not demand. Existing art will appreciate in value since there won't be anything coming into the market to compete with it. In addition, there's the surcharge conferred by the mystique of extinction; subsequently, recent art will lead the price rise as the last of its kind. In fact, it will stand not as the last but as the culmination, since the ideology of progress so sways the Western mind that it regularly mistakes the latest of anything for the final form of a supposed evolutionary process. The last shall be made first, or at least it'll be priced that way. No wonder some of the less commercially successful contemporary artists are leading the Art Strike, and no wonder others follow them. They don't propose exactly to *destroy* artworks (although, if done selectively, that would have nearly the same effect as an Art Strike). The Years Without Art will include nothing of the kind, even if *everybody* joins the strike. Instead, the Art Strike will create a cartel — its inspiration isn't the IWW or the CNT, but rather OPEC.

The Art Strike is not, for all its proletarian posturing, in any way indebted to the workers movement, except for the theft of what you'd expect artists to steal — its imagery. It enables artists to invest their exhaustion with importance. The refusal of art only certifies artists as the expert interpreters of what nobody but artists do. The *art of refusal*, on the other hand, acts against what everybody does but nobody once did, against work and submission to the state. The art of refusal *is* the art of living, which begins with the general strike that never ends.