



## Essex Business School

**Reshaping Resistance: Art Strikes & Cultural Labor Today**

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March, 2010

## Reshaping Resistance: Art Strikes & Cultural Labor Today

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*Presented at the University of Leicester, March 9th, 2010.*

*Everyone is an artist.* This would seem a simple enough place to begin; with a statement connecting directly to Joseph Beuys, and more generally to the historic avant-garde's aesthetic politics aiming to break down barriers between artistic production and everyday life. It invokes an artistic politics that runs through Dada to the Situationists, and meanders and *dérives* through various rivulets in the history of radical politics and social movement organizing. But let's pause for a second. While seemingly simple, there is much more to this one statement than presents itself. It is a



*Figure 1: Joseph Beuys*

statement that contains within it two notions of time and the potentials of artistic and cultural production, albeit notions that are often conflated, mixed, or confused. By teasing out these two notions and creatively recombining them, perhaps there might be something to be gained in rethinking the antagonistic and movement-building potential of cultural production: to reconsider its compositional potential.

The first notion alludes to a kind of potentiality present but unrealized through artistic work; the creativity that everyone could exercise if they realized and developed

potentials that have been held back and stunted by capital and unrealistic conceptions of artistic production through mystified notions of creative genius. Let's call this the 'not-yet' potential of everyone *becoming* an artist through the horizontal sublation of art into daily life. The second understanding of the phrase forms around the argument that everyone *already* is an artist and embodies creative action and production within their life and being. Duchamp's notion of the readymade gestures towards this as he proclaims art as the recombination of previously existing forms. The painter creates by recombining the pre-given readymades of paints and canvas; the baker creates by recombining the readymade elements of flour, yeast, etc. In other words, it is not that everyone will become an artist, but that everyone already is immersed in myriad forms of creative production, or artistic production, given a more general notion of art.

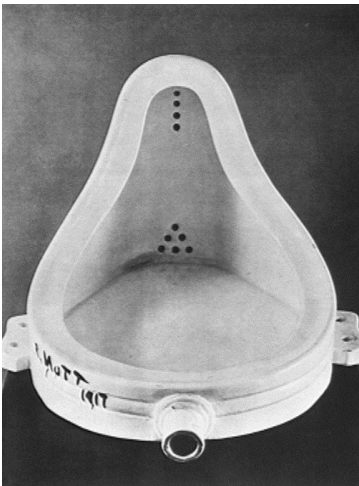


Figure 2: DuChamp's "Fountain" readymade

These two notions, how they collide and overlap, move towards an important focal point: if there has been an end of the avant-garde it is not its death but rather a monstrous multiplication and expansion of artistic production in zombified forms. The avant-garde has not died, the creativity contained within the future oriented potential of *the becoming-artistic* has lapsed precisely because it has perversely been realized in existing forms of diffuse cultural production. "Everyone is an artist" as a utopian possibility is realized just as "everyone is a worker." This condition has reached a new degree of concentration and intensity within the basins of cultural production; the post-Fordist

participation-based economy where the multitudes are sent to work in the metropolitan factory, recombining ideas and images through social networks and technologically mediated forms of communication. We don't often think of all these activities as either work or art. Consequently it becomes difficult to think through the politics of labor around them, whether as artistic labor or just labor itself.

The notion of the Art Strike, its reconsideration and socialization within the post-Fordist economy, becomes more interesting and productive (or perhaps anti-productive) precisely as labor changes articulation in relation to the current composition of artistic and cultural work. The Art Strike starts with Gustav Metzger and the Art Worker Coalition and their call to withdraw their labor for a minimum of three years from 1977–1980. Metzger's formulation of the Art Strike is directed against the problems of the gallery system. Metzger's conception was picked up by Stewart Home and various others within the Neoist milieu who called upon artists to cease artistic work entirely for the years 1990–1993. In this version, the strike moves beyond a focus on the gallery system to a more general consideration of artistic production and a questioning of the role of the artist. In the most recent and presently emerging iteration, Redas Dirzys and a Temporary Art Strike Committee have been calling for an Art Strike currently as a response to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, becoming a

European Capital of Culture for 2009. The designation of a city as a capital of culture is part of a process of metropolitan branding and a strategy of capitalist valorization through the

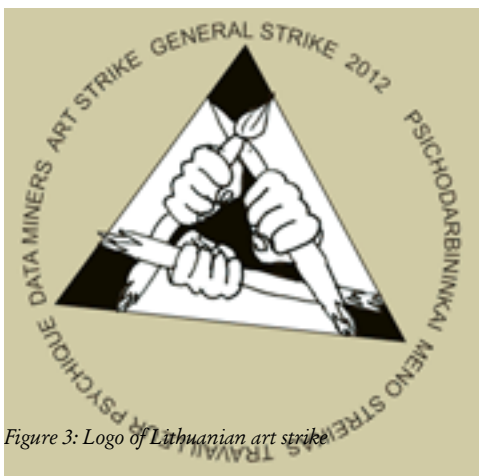


Figure 3: Logo of Lithuanian art strike

circulation of cultural and artistic heritage. (In Vilnius this has played out through figures like Jonas Mekas, George Maciunas, the legacy of Fluxus, and the Uzupis arts district.) In Vilnius we see the broadening of the Art Strike from a focus on the gallery system to artistic production more generally, and finally to the ways in which artistic and cultural production are infused throughout daily life and embedded within the production of the metropolis.

The Art Strike emerges as a nodal point for finding ways to work critically between the two compositional modes contained within the statement ‘everyone is an artist.’ An autonomist politics focuses on class composition, or the relation between the technical arrangement of economic production and the political composition activated by forms of social insurgency and resistance. Capital evolves by turning emerging political compositions into technical compositions of surplus value production. Similarly, the aesthetic politics of the avant-garde find the political compositions they animate turned into new forms of value production and circulation. The Art Strike becomes a tactic for working between the utopian not-yet promise of unleashed creativity and the always-already but compromised forms of artistic labor we’re enmeshed in. In the space between forms of creative recombination currently in motion, and the potential of what could be if they were not continually rendered into forms more palatable to capitalist production, something new emerges. To re-propose an Art Strike at this juncture, when artistic labor is both everywhere and nowhere, is to force that issue. It becomes not a concern of solely the one who identifies (or is identified) as the artist, but a method to withdraw the labor of imagination and

recombination involved in what we're already doing to hint towards the potential of what we could be doing.

Bob Black, in his critique of the Art Strike, argues that far from going on a strike by withdrawing forms of artistic labor, the Art Strike formed as the ultimate realization of art, where even the act of not making art becomes part of an artistic process. While Black might have meant to point out a hypocrisy or contradiction, if we recall the overlapping compositional modes of everyone being an artist, this no longer appears as an antinomy but rather a shifting back and forth between different compositional modes. While Stewart Home has argued repeatedly that the importance of the Art Strike lies not in its feasibility but rather in the ability to expand the terrain of class struggle, Black objects to this on the grounds that most artistic workers operate as independent contractors and therefore strikes do not make sense for them. While this is indeed a concern, it is also very much the condition encountered by forms of labor in a precarious post-Fordist economy. The Art Strike moves from being a proposal for social action by artists to a form of social action potentially of use to all who find their creativity and imagination exploited within existing productive networks.

But ask the skeptics: how we can enact this form of strike? And, as comrades and allies inquire, how can this subsumption of creativity and imagination and creativity by capital be undone? That is precisely the problem, for as artistic and cultural production become more ubiquitous and spread throughout the social field, they are rendered all the more apparently imperceptible. The avant-garde focus on

shaping relationality (for instance in Beuys' notion of social sculpture), or in creative recombination and détournement, exists all around us flowing through the net economy. Relational aesthetics recapitulates avant-garde ideas and practices into a capital-friendly, service economy aesthetics. This does not mean that they are useless or that they should be discarded. Rather, by teasing out the compositional modes contained within them they can be considered and reworked. How can we struggle around or organize diffuse forms of cultural and artistic labor? This is precisely the kind of question explored by groups such as the Carrotworkers' Collective, a group from London who are formulating ways to organize around labor involved in unpaid forms of cultural production, such as all the unpaid internships sustaining the workings of artistic and cultural institutions.

In 1953, Guy Debord painted on the wall of the Rue de Seine the slogan "*Ne travaillez jamais*," or "Never Work." The history of the avant-garde is filled with calls to "never artwork," but the dissolution of the artistic object and insurgent energies of labor refusal have become rendered into the workings of semicapitalism and the metropolitan factory. To renew and rebuild a politics and form of social movement adequate to the current composition does not start from romanticizing the potentiality of becoming creative through artistic production or working from the creative production that already is, but rather by working in the nexus between the two. In other words, to start from how the refusal of work is re-infused into work, and by understanding that imposition and rendering, and struggling within, against and through it.



Programme préalable au mouvement situationniste.

Cette inscription, sur un mur de la rue de Seine, remonte aux premiers mois de 1953 (une inscription voisine qui relève de la politique traditionnelle aide à dater avec la plus sûre objectivité le tracé de celle qui nous intéresse : appelant à une manifestation contre le général Ridgway, elle ne peut donc être postérieure à mai 1952). L'inscription que nous reproduisons ici semble être la plus importante trace jamais relevée sur le site de Saint-Germain-des-Près, comme témoignage du mode de vie particulier qui a tenté de s'affirmer là.

## References

Art Strike Biennial: <http://www.alytusbiennial.com>

Carrotworkers' Collective: <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com>

Home, Stewart (1991) *The Neoist Manifestos/The Art Strike Papers*. Stirling: AK Press.