

Art Workers, Art Strikes and Collective Actions

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In 1974, the late artist Gustave Metzger, well-known for his auto-destructive art, urged his peers to join him in a three year art strike between 1977 and 1980. His action has endured in the history of art as one of the most powerful, albeit paradoxical rallying call for artists to stop making art. In his manifesto he urged his peers not to produce art, sell their work, participate in exhibition, and in general to withdraw from taking part in the art world machine:

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.¹

Metzger's statement was written for the catalogue of the exhibition "Art into Society/Society into Art: Seven German Artists" at the London Institute of Contemporary Art. Metzger stated he decided to participate in the exhibition only after pressure from the curators, as he became critical of being subsumed by the capitalist art world. The artist's strike proposal was understood as utopian by his peers and the art strike did not bring about the cessation of all artistic work. Metzger was the only artist who took it up for the entire three years. In his later writings however, he also emphasized a productive aspect of the strike, that of creating a critical understanding of the artist's practice and theory production. Metzger's call for strike was not simply about escaping the (art)world, but stemmed from a desire to change it. The question of the politics of art production has also been put under scrutiny



John Cox (author of photography), Gustav Metzger practicing for a public demonstration of auto-destructive art using acid on nylon, 1960.

by art workers coalitions, syndicates and communes since at least the nineteenth century. Some of these self-organized groups argued and criticized, in the form of protests and public interventions, for artists' rights and the transformation of cultural institutions embedded in power and capital. The emergence of these groups and initiatives occurred at a critical historical junctures, on the backdrop of social movements from around the world. Central to their arguments was an attempt to position the historically reoccurring notion of the "art worker," in shifting labor relations bound to the production and dissemination of art and culture.

In the second half of the nineteenth century reactionary appeals to an art for art's sake clashed with principles of an emerging avant-gardism. During the revolutionary period in France, artist Gustave Courbet penned the famous Realist Manifesto (1855),² immediately after Marx's famous Communist Manifesto (1848). Those were turbulent times of class and political conflicts, from the moment the working class entered the scene as an autonomous political force to the French workers'



Charles Soulier. The fallen Vendôme Column, May 1871. From the series Paris Incendié.

brief, yet powerful Commune – which was brutally suppressed by the bourgeoisie. Courbet's confidence in the artist's role in changing society towards a liberated, socialist future were strongly shaped by his participation in the Commune. In 1871 he called on Parisian artists to "assume control of the museums and art collections which, though the property of the nation, are primarily theirs, from the intellectual as well as the material point of view."³ Courbet's statement responded to the paradigm shift of the economic framework, wherein the transfer of capital accumulated by capitalist organizations created a new class, the bourgeoisie, whose image was built through the salon culture. Emerging as new spaces for the presentation and enjoyment of bourgeois art, the salons operated autonomously from the church and the monarchy, as powerful, independent entities. Courbet challenged this system and the political classes it upheld through his support for the communards' removal of the Vendôme Column (a the memorial to Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz in 1805) in 1871, as commissar of culture in the Commune committee. For his role in this event Courbet was heavily fined and imprisoned for half a year. In 1873 it was proposed to re-erect the column (the bronze panels had survived) at a cost of 323,000 francs, which Courbet was to pay off in installments of 10,000 francs a year. Instead he escaped to Switzerland, where he died in 1877. The transformation of the artist's subjectivity as art worker and activist during the latter half of the 19th century was a landmark moment that continues to define the relationship between art and social movements today. Courbet's appeal was one of the first instances when artists' aspiration for social change led them to align themselves with a wider workers' movement and break with the bourgeois institutions of art and with the monarchy. Transgressing from artistic praxis into political action, artists could be

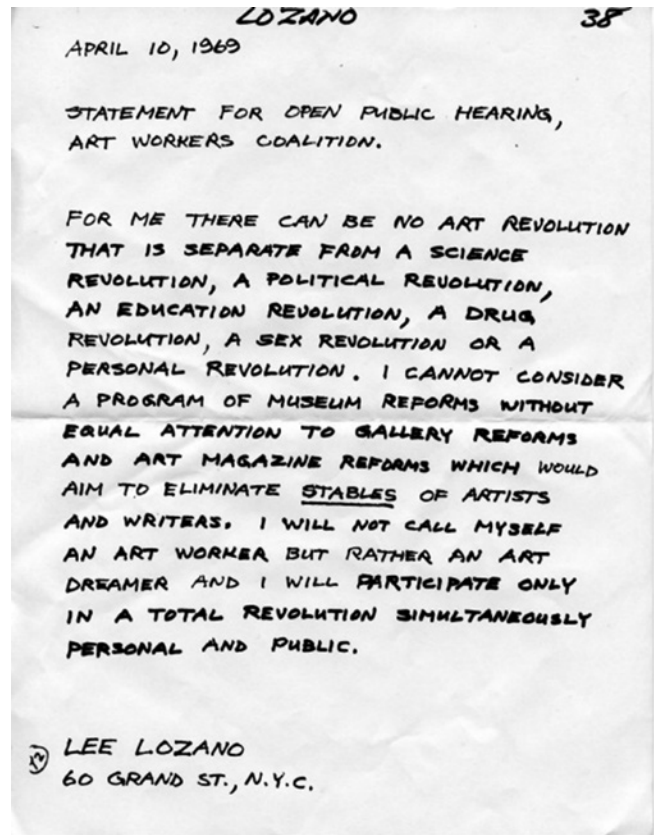


Marc Riboud, 1968 Atelier Populaire, Ex-école des Beaux Arts, Paris, 1968.

considered as a counter-power, occupying political functions in a new order, no matter how briefly this lasted.

In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s artists were once more among the first to self-organize, identifying with the workforce under pressure to accept pay cuts, pension cuts and to disband unions. In 1968 France, artists, workers and students, pent up with anger over general poverty, unemployment, the conservative government, and military involvement in Southeast Asia, took to the streets in waves of strikes and demonstrations. Factories and universities were occupied. Atelier Populaire (the Popular Workshop), an arts organization founded by art students and faculty on strike at the École des Beaux Arts in the capital, produced street posters and banners for the revolt that would: "Give concrete support to the great movement of the workers on strike who are occupying their factories in defiance of the Gaullist government." The material was designed and printed anonymously and distributed freely, held up on barricades, carried in demonstrations, and plastered on walls all over France. The Atelier intended this material not be taken as, "the final outcome of an experience, but as an inducement for finding, through contact with the masses, new levels of action, both on the cultural and the political plane."⁴

In their actions, the students were also influenced by ideas presented in the L'Internationale Situationniste, a periodical written by Guy Debord and a groups of



Left: Anonymous, *La Beauté est dans la rue* (Beauty is in the streets), May 1968, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Right: A statement by Lee Lozano, a central figure in 1960s conceptual art and the Art Workers Coalition.

like-minded artists between 1958 and 1969. A key idea was subversiveness. Everything could be subverted: authority and its representatives, of course, be they politicians, parents, trade unions or trendy intellectuals, but also behaviour and art forms. Situationist graffiti scrawled on the Sorbonne walls proclaimed “Ne travaillez jamais” (Never work) and “Il est interdit d’interdire” (It is forbidden to forbid).⁵ Unlike its predecessor, the 19th century Artists Commune, *Atelier Populaire* did not seek to become a political power, but functioned as a critical cultural frame around the left-leaning social movement in France at the time. However, they expressed support for several positive objectives: self-management by workers, a decentralization of economic and political power and participatory democracy at the grass roots. They sought to resist the absorption of any and all critical ideas or movements under a contemporary capitalism, which was capable of bending them to its own advantage. Hence, the need for provocative shock tactics. “Be realistic: Demand the impossible!” was one of the May movement’s slogans.

In 1969, a turbulent socio-political global climate, an international group of artists and critics formed the Art Workers’ Coalition in New York. Hundreds of artists who self-identified as art workers participated in the AWC’s open meetings.



The Art Strike on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 22, 1970. Robert Morris and Poppy Johnson, strike co-chairs, at right, debate museum vice-director Joseph Noble, at left beside striking artist Art Coppedge. Photo by Jan van Raay.

Perhaps the most radical form of refusal that coincided with the formation and agitation of the AWC was General Strike Piece by Lee Lozano. In a statement read during the AWC's meeting in April, Lozano declared herself in excess of the limits of the "art worker" identity, identifying herself as an "art dreamer" who would "participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public." As curator Helen Molesworth pointed out, her "word pieces" inverted the artist's role of attending their gaze upon the art object and instead "train(ed) her attention on the public and private functions of herself as an artist."⁶ Beginning with Dialogue Piece, Lozano laid a foundation for moving away from the problem of the art as a commodity, not purely by the "dematerialization" of art, but by the flight of the artists themselves. With 1969's General Strike Piece, Lozano began exiting the art world by refusing to attend "uptown functions" be they openings, parties at museums and galleries, screenings, concerts or any other "gatherings related to the art world," while simultaneously initiating a "boycott of women" which resulted in her leaving New York for a life of relative isolation in Dallas where she continued to refuse any interaction with either the art world or any woman in public life. Molesworth, who describes this double refusal as "consummately idealistic" and "utterly pathological" (respectively) recognizes both things being refused, capitalism and patriarchy, as "incredibly powerful parameters of identity... systems with rules and logics that are public with personal effects."

On May 15th, 1970, Robert Morris, a well known sculptor and conceptual artist, closed his solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum stating: “This act of closing ...a cultural institution is intended to underscore the need I and others feel to shift priorities at this time from art making and viewing to unified action within the art community against the intensifying conditions of repression, war and racism in this country.” Morris’s exhibition took place at an especially charged moment in American history: the Whitney show opened, the United States bombed Cambodia, the National Guard shot and killed four students at Kent State, and, in a highly publicized confrontation, New York City construction workers attacked antiwar protesters. Morris decision to shut down his show two weeks early in a self-declared strike stemmed from debates about art labor and laborers in the United States.⁷ It inspired a city wide day of action undertaken by the AWC: “The New York Art Strike against Racism, War and Repression.” In the spring of 1970, artists felt that their collective organizing as art workers offered a platform for major change, as vital reconsiderations regarding the valuation of artistic labor were being debated. The Art Workers’ Coalition was formed in 1969 to debate questions about museum policy and leftist politics. It became a powerful organization through which New York artists voiced their discontent with institutionalization, gender bias, and the art world’s stance on the Vietnam War. The war became a focus and rallying point, and the Museum of Modern Art in particular increasingly came under fire because of the members of its board of trustees and their economic connections to industries that profited from the war. The group presented the museum a list of demands: subsidies for universal employment, rather than support from private capital from wealthy patrons,⁸ the introduction of a royalties system by which collectors had to pay artists a percentage of their profits from resale, for the creation of a trust fund for living artists, and that all museums should be open for free at all times, and that their opening hours should accommodate the working classes. They also demanded that art institutions make exhibition space available for women, minorities and artists with no gallery representing them. In 1970 the AWC formed an alliance with MoMA’s Staff Association and by working simultaneously from both inside and outside the institution, they established PASTA (The Professional and Administrative Staff Association). This was one of the most significant unions of art workers in the United States, as it joined together the interest of artist with those in similarly precarious conditions who are involved in different aspects of artistic production.⁹ Although the Art Workers Coalition folded after three years of intense activities, their legacy endured.

In February 1979, two years after Metzger’s unanswered call for an art strike, Goran Đorđević 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 labor.¹⁰ Đorđević received forty replies, the majority of which expressed doubts about the possibility of putting the International Art Strike into practice. Because so few artists were prepared to pledge their support, Đorđević abandoned his plan for an International Art Strike.



Art Strike Action Committee, Cover of the Journal Yawn, 1991

British artist Stewart Home's Art Strike of 1990–1993 was inspired by the language of Gustav Metzger's and Goran Đorđević's proposal and its importance as a symbolic gesture, due, in part, to its embrace of the absurd.¹¹ This Art Strike was a stand against capitalism's ability to recuperate any image or action, yet, instead of targeting the institutions of art as the main perpetrators, Home looked to artists themselves for their complicity in their own economic manipulation and co-optation. The journal *YAWN*, co-published by Art Strike Action Committee centers in San Francisco, London, and Iowa City, among other locations, launched its first issue in September 1989. Home's manifesto, contained within, declared: "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...to connote and encourage active rather than passive engagement with the issues at hand." Each subsequent issue was filled with the similarly assertive language of his manifesto, and all images and texts produced in support of the Art Strike were of an explicitly propagandistic nature. The arguments presented around the demonstration's concept, however, were intentionally inconsistent and contradictory. As suggested in the preceding quote, the active engagement of Home's Art Strike is not a withdrawal at all. In fact, Home continued to create artwork during the period of the strike under the pseudonyms of Karen Eliot and Monty Cantsin, thereby challenging the privileging of a singular author in the production of art,

and the celebrity status that this enables.¹² Home was interested “not in the prospect of the art world collapsing” but, like Metzger, in the effect the strike might have on his and other artists’ “identity.”

I will now return to the concept of the art worker and its historical associations with the left, exploring the class contradictions inherent in this form of artistic subjectivity. I explore the affinities between twentieth century avant-gardes and the organized left, and their continuing legacy in the present, given economic and political changes. Between calls for non-participation and withdrawal, on the one hand, at to create new art worlds on the other, today’s art workers are seeking to affect social transformation in myriad ways and through various ideas about what this entails. These efforts can be enriched by a renewed understanding of the past endeavors as important consciousness raising experiences and models for organizations.

In May 2012, the self-organized Citizen Forum for Contemporary Arts (Obywatelskie Forum Sztuki Współczesnej - OFSW), staged a one-day art strike – a day without arts and culture.¹³ The aim of the strike was to influence the public discussion of cultural matters, including the symbolic and political, but also economical place of artists and cultural producers within the public sphere and social hierarchies. Around the same time, a proposed change to tax law meaning a reduction or elimination of a flat-rate allowance to reclaim up to fifty percent of costs from revenue on contracts was announced. Such a change would further harm the majority of artists and cultural producers who are often reliant on commission contracts and need to then recoup the costs of their production, materials, etc. This provided further impetus for the OFSW action. ‘The day without art’, the first to ever take place in Poland, followed the aforementioned well established, if sporadically enacted and relatively little-known tradition of artists’ refusal of work. Such actions attempted to disrupt the role and position of artists themselves, or to address issues in the cultural economy and creative industries in more general terms. Most recently, in 2012, the London-based Precarious Workers Brigade¹⁴, a group organizing for several years around the issue of precarity within cultural and creative work, called for a Cultural Workers Walkout, in solidarity with other casual and public sector workers taking part in a national strike the same day. The Polish art strike was, by all accounts, quite a small and seemingly insignificant event, relatively speaking. A number of galleries and institutions did however express solidarity, and some did indeed close their doors for the day, in addition to a handful of protesting OFSW members, some bystanders, and one banner. In terms of media coverage or turnout it certainly did not stand out amongst demonstrations and strike actions staged that year by workers in other sectors. However, the strike did kick-start a non-going debate about cultural and artistic production in Poland. It brought, once and for all, the often-invisible working conditions in the arts and culture into the public domain. Most importantly, it cemented the credentials of the autonomous, horizontally organized OFSW as an effective and credible model for artists and cultural producers to represent themselves and each other in a field that is unstable, mostly reliant on decreasing amounts of public funding, and characterized by increasing levels of competition and individualism.

This first public action of OFSW not only brought the economic conditions of artistic and cultural work into open discussion, but also into the streets of Warsaw, where contemporaneous protests, be it by nurses or taxi drivers, were taking place. Thus, not only were their often obscured working conditions and labour made visible, but also the ideological distance between the labour of artists and cultural producers, and that of workers in general, was dramatically reduced. Artists and cultural producers on contingent, casual and temporary contracts, without health insurance or pensions, increasingly without the ability to own a home or afford the mortgage and burdened with debt, are, in terms of employment law and economic survival, often leading the way for workers in other sectors. Therefore, when some twisted joke on the original mission of the art avant-garde casts artists as new models of employment in an increasingly deregulated, neoliberal job market, an erasure of the ideological gap between art and labour, and the dismantling of the myth of artistic genius could be an important political strategy.

OFSW joined forces with the trade union movement, or rather, one of the new unions, the recently formed Inicjatywa Pracownicza (IP/ Workers' Initiative), which began in 2001 as a continuation of various self-organized grassroots and anarcho-syndicalist groups active mainly in and around Poznan. In 2004 it became an officially recognized union. IP was formed as a reaction to the crisis of Poland's official union movement—its bureaucracy, passivity and links with the antisocial and anti-worker governments – but also as a union that recognizes new forms of employment and contracts not recognized by traditional unions, also paying attention to specific issues concerning female and migrant labour. IP allows for the formation



Citizen Forum for ContemporaryArts / OFSW, Strike - Call for the government to negotiate with artists, 2012.

of autonomous collegial commissions that can then support workers on casual contracts, or those who are self-employed. To date, the biggest success of the commission has been with regard to the issue of guaranteed minimum fees for artists. In February 2014 four institutions—Art Museum, Łódź, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Zachęta National Art Gallery, Warsaw and Arsenał Gallery, Poznań—signed an official agreement regarding such fees. A further five institutions pledged to sign the agreement as well. While this leaves artists in Poland far off the relative security of other countries' models, for instance the German system of social insurance for artists, or organizational models, such as the Scottish Artist Union, the commission is definitely a first step towards some more concrete solutions. The formation of such a group, in a sector so heavily reliant on competition and individualism as the art world, and where even a few years ago it would have seemed scarcely achievable, can be counted as a success in itself.

Art workers' groups and collectives have for the last few years moved towards thinking more critically in the direction of how this system could be transformed, and meaningful ways of engagement in the art world today. What does it mean to re-claim the institutional space, to disrupt the business as usual of auction houses, big galleries, or even take over corrupt state institutions in the long term? What kind of artistic education exists outside the private academia, and can it create real social alternatives and ways of thinking and doing an engaged art, opening the possibilities for resistant political subjectivities? Similarly as it is the case of post-Occupy era activists who grapple with common issues of the ephemerality of their actions when transforming public spaces in cities across the globe, so do present-day art workers strive towards finding depth-reaching strategies to transform culture and society. It seems ever more important then to insist on the yet not consolidated openings and alternatives engendered by the social movements of the past few years, in which art and culture played important roles.

My aim in this text has been to chart different strategies of art workers whose ideas and visual languages go against the grain of the usual aesthetics and discourses. Emphasizing the international character of a growing resistance calling for a different way of making art, running institutions and therefore doing politics, these art workers translate their aspirations into a renewed cycle of struggles. Finally, my research may serve as a tool for connecting and mapping different active groups and initiatives, which do not necessarily come together into a composite solution to all problems. Rather, much is to be learned from areas of overlap and tension between ways of organizing, alternative economies and alternative art production, and cultural and political ties between different groups and sectors of the present-day artistic working class. We can then begin think through coordinating these struggles, and perhaps even how an international union of art workers could function. While there is more awareness of these activist initiatives around the world, many art workers' struggles continue to be local/regional and remain atomized. We must continue to act and imagine a larger, international union or coalition that can offer resistance and solidarity.

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