

From Art Strike to Human Strike: Subjects are Leaving the Factory

*You've got a very soft vision of art
You've got a deficit disorder of heart
These are the wings of an endangered drum pattern
This is the flight of the hapless, you've got it all backwards*
DJ Krush

To consider the abysmal nature of the profession of the artist is a complicated process that cannot be dealt with in a couple of sentences. Therefore we will only discuss in which way individual actors conceive and implement their departure, how "break-aways" from the existing art systems are argued and formalized and in where the potential of such a gesture can lie. The word *strike* is not to be understood as a means of creating pressure in the context of a (de facto non-existent) labor conflict, but rather as a pattern of political action that some of the artists named below relate in their performative works.

Motives for the departure from art are conceptual as well as material in nature, and in many cases a combination of both. In order to formulate a somewhat distanced critique of the art system as such, it might be more convenient to focus on the critical artistic statement only, leaving the personal situation of the artist, the struggle for making a living or social recognition and reward, aside. There have been singular cases where quite materially successful artists took the consequence of leaving the art scene because of their critical understanding of the institution of art. But with the emergence of a somewhat inflationary trend towards „critical art practice“ on the other side, a whole new range of opportunities opened up for those positions that before would have subsisted at the very margins of the art scene.

However, a pure ideological or institutional critique, that which ignores social and economical conditions, and the subjective "suffering" of the silenced majority, would miss the core of the matter. It is at the same time a concern to abstract also from the specific interests of the actors within the art industry, in order to highlight tendencies that reflect the wider structural transformations of contemporary society.

The problem of the participation is many-sided and departures from the scene can only be individually argued. Nevertheless, it is clear to all that the unhappiness in this career has a direct connection to economical insecurity. And yet it appears the image of the organized collective labor struggle is un-connectable with the features of the field of labor and the self-conceptions of the protagonists. From now on it is certain, that within the cognitive factory of the culture-worker other forms of protest will have to be invented, and for now the idea of the strike will be only a slogan, a placeholder for the new collective ritual of placing themselves in the right.

The outlook appears rather bleak, the "Complaining on a Higher Level" makes up the majority of the conversations between colleagues: the genius is starved, the atelier is reduced to the size of a monitor, the work-day parceled into distinct work fields and is therefore endless, and the market of attention asks for online-portfolios of our tastes, within which our perversions as well as political inclinations, social contacts or

consumer preferences are cultivated and curated. The material subsistence happens between unskilled labor in the low-income-sector and the exploitation of soft-skills - learned in the training camps of the cultural network-job, only to finally be sold out on the desktops of the creative economy.

Depression and clinical symptoms are increasing as a result of the changing job market, for which the culture-sector with its precarious agreements progresses. [1] Before our faces, the pyramid-structure of the field is erected, in which the great majority of participants find no living: stiff competition and secret selection-mechanisms generate the success of the circa 2% of all art college graduates who "make it" (what exactly?). There is no shortage of reasons for a mass walk-out from the culture-sector. The negligence of art happens on multiple and contrary ways, in many recognized and exalted exit-scenarios of some established artists – and far more often simply by gradually letting go, in not so clearly observable, addressable moments of countless biographies. It shows in the statistics – in case any official organization would even undertake the effort to collect the data. In these moments when you are not really able to answer when being asked about your profession. In the burnt out space between the last project and the next funding application, or in the mill between meaningless hourly-work and the unused atelier, and so on.

While lamenting this progressing artistic dying-off we primarily seek to recapitulate some of the exit-performances that are motivated by general ideological doubts concerning the social bubble that goes under the name art system.

The more famous examples of terminated artist careers are often marked by some form of proclamation or performative verbal act. While they are in the act of professional suicide the actors paradoxically seem to sneak back into the realms of representation. Instead of simply exiting, a substitute (a text, manifesto, proclamation, some sort of message) is created and distributed in order to communicate and mark the NO MORE. Instead of the NOTHING, once more, SOMETHING is created. The exit of Lee Lozano (1969) is not simply a drop out, but a Drop Out Piece: the last and maybe most famous esthetic invention that overshadows all previous work and is situated at the end of Lozano's artistic development that starts with painting and proceeds to a series of conceptual manipulations of her own social life (see below). Her exit, like all previous performances, is marked by a handwritten program (Lozano's artistic signature, literally). These documents are preserved and form the foundation for a musealisation of manifestations that emerged in the borderland between Lozano's private live and her performances.

Forms of collective exits may be traced back to the historical avant-garde and secessionist movements of the early twentieth century. Facing the complete reintegration of radical aims of difference, for example the Futurists, Surrealists or Situationists into the canon of art history, a question arises: is the artistic exit or the secession from the cultural mainstream ever anything else but "friendly fire"?

What exactly happens, exit from the art world or radical take-over and re-evaluation of the art-term, seems strangely interchangeable. It is possible to think, that it is not so much the intention of the individual actor or his/her ability of articulation that

decides if through the artists own act of speech (manifesto, program or other presentation of rejection) the exit is even happening, if a border is crossed or maybe altered. It is the historical reception that owns the capacity to either ignore the avant-gardistic break of border or to evacuate it retrospectively from its own opposition in order to posthumously reintegrate the material, that its contemporaries then rejected as an improper and unacceptable assault, back into art history. This curve of the artistic flight attempt is a remarkable characteristic, which seems to play mostly beyond the individuals control and which has its origin in the paradoxical heteronomy of the art profession. Simplified, the matter could be summarized as a forced re-integration of oppositional positions into the bourgeois-liberal canon of the culturally accepted. Assimilation of differences – core-business of post-ideological / neo-liberal societies – thereby constitutes the gravitational field that predetermines the failure of the majority of all attempted artistic escape projects. Failure however does not imply that the withdrawal was not completed as planned, or that the suspension was not successful from the subjective point of view. Lee Lozano actually managed to never again set foot in the art-world, and also others, like the painter Eugen Schönebeck have on political grounds and with full consequence stopped producing or publishing works. Yet the reception machinery doesn't stop for individual decisions: the more radical the drop-out, the more the case of Lozanos or Schönebecks moves to the center of attention. Where even a shred of paper testifies to the exit, it is exhibited with a vengeance. When no such document exists, the exit remains the salt in the soup of every retrospective show. Thus the nihilistic act is ultimately never fully realized. The prominent exits can not remove their authorship. Inevitably the individual exit, the original subjective act is added to the cultural capital. The drop-out remains a cultural *product*, its documentation becomes a material work of art, exhibitable or even sellable. Even the physical disappearance of Bas Jan Ader remains under suspicion of an artistic farce and may be the motivation his a posthumous(?) reception. And oh, irony of destiny, Lee Lozano's legacy is represented today by major international gallery Hauser & Wirth.

Besides individual exits a series of temporary strikes were proclaimed, one might almost speak of an aesthetic tradition. Here again, Lee Lozano *General Strike Piece* [2] must be mentioned, a programmatic text, part of her body of work titled *Total Personal & Public Revolution*, publicly read 1969 in an open meeting of the New York Art Workers Coalition. Over a period of approximately half a year, Lozano boycotted participation in any functions and events of the "Uptown" art world – with one crucial exception: exhibitions and events during which she presented her so-called *Pieces* (the above-mentioned series of boycotts) were excluded from the strike.

Especially during the late 1960s and early 70s, a number of exits, strikes or similar activities were proclaimed. This temporary accumulation may relate to the disappointment in the political stance conceptual art had advanced with the dematerialisation of the art object – which, by the time has already been added to the best commercialized commodities in the art market. On the other side was the pull of the anti-Vietnam protests and emancipatory movements that did not leave the artists unaffected, and so were boycotts and strikes like the Art Workers Coalition motivated by the unwillingness to provide works to exhibit in public art institutions, the identified representatives of the criminally violent state.

Gustav Metzger called in 1974 for an art strike, the *Years Without Art 1977-1980*, which set itself the lofty goal of toppling the art system:

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 an exhibition, and refuse collaboration with any part of the publicity machinery of the art-world. This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state. [3]

The goal of the action was a thinning of the "purely capitalistic-organized art system and its actors" and the "creation of alternative exhibition opportunities". In a fictitious scenario provoked at the end of the text, Metzger called for the formation of artist paramilitary groups to assassinate the gallerists. The result was the exclusion of Metzger from the art world for the following two decades. [4]

The *Art Strike 1990-1993* (copied, in best plagiarism-manner, from Metzger's *Years Without Art 1977-1980*) goes back to british artist Stuart Home. It continues in neoist tradition the strategy of fake affirmation of cultural criticism as activism. The international ART STRIKE ACTION COMMITTEES (ASACs) operated the so called YAWN communiqués edited and destributed by several groups, especially in Great Britain and the United States from about 1987, spreading the campaign for the *Art Strike 1990-1993*. These strike calls, that are always flirting with their own futility, were not motivated by current political events such as the AWC protests of the late 60s. But the aim of the argument is in a similar direction, albeit presented in the form of a distanced provocation. Art is sentenced in ironic-polemic treatises as a fuel for the capitalist, violence-producing society. [5]

What emerges is an indication of a genuine, in retrospect, however, seemingly-naïve social commitment of the 60s, to a disillusioned, cynical, militant rhetoric of the 80s.

A new edition of the Art Strike proclamations took place in recent years at the Alytus Biennial, a network meeting of collectives and individuals in the Estonian town of Alytus, protesting against Biennialization and misguided cultural policy using anti-art / neoist strategies.

The manifesto of the LABOUR UNION OF DATA MINERS AND PSYCHIC WORKERS calls in this context for a general strike in 2012 and introduces in its sprawling manifesto the following catalog of imaginable and unimaginable forms of strike.

*Our aim is a General Strike:
Our aim is an economical strike
Our aim is a social strike,
Our aim is a cultural strike,
Our aim is a sexual strike,
Our aim is a psychic strike. [6]*

Here, the Idea of the strike entirely escapes its conventional framework of institutionalized negotiation rituals in the social democratic tradition and encircles, similarly radically as Lee Lozano's *General Strike Piece*, all areas of life that usually do not belong to the category of work. The text is turning with brutal irony towards what can be observed as an infiltration of work paradigms into all possible kinds of personal, intimate, psychological aspects of life. With this subsumption of all facets of the subject under the imperative of exploitation, the increasing inability to dis-relate oneself from the self-conceptions of the so-called performance society, the possibility of a denial seems imaginable merely in the form of a total boycott of individual and social satisfaction. As exaggerated as such intellectual edifice might seem, it hits into the midst of the still insufficiently explored problem area. We have to not (only) demand more pay, but also *change ourselves*. Where work starts to breed, under the skin, in the lowlands of the unconscious or libidinal, it must be encountered with tricks, rhetoric and exorcism, with idleness, illogic, digressions, procrastination, non-articulated affect. This could be followed by argumentations that question the socially determined primacy of action and activity, as does for example Kathrin Busch, who deals with the potential of the non-action, the passivity. [7]

Considerations on the role of artistic work and its non-use as a form of opposition also took place in the Yugoslav concept art. In 1979 the Serbian artist Goran Djordjevic planned the General Strike of Artists and tried to persuade colleagues such as Susan Hiller, Hans Haacke or John Latham by letter to do join (in vain). And again, even this collection of correspondences on the attempted strike found its way into exhibitions.[8] The refusal to work, that is doomed to fail as an actual collective action, functions without any problems in the refuge of that which is representable as art. Djordjevic's project is one of a number of artistic comments on the dialectic between art and work, and the potential of denial inherent in artistic action.

Mladen Stilinovic's known work *Artist at Work* of 1977 shows the artist meditating or sleeping in bed. Here, the ambiguity of the concept of work is targeted, the slacker, dreamer, bum identified with the toiling proletariat – until then an unthinkable projection that retrospectively bears a certain prophetic aspect.

At what point between inactivity and activity begins the art work? Is the work of an artist not as closely associated with the identity, that its termination would lead to total (rather than just professional) phlegm? And is not the artist who establishes his/her total apathy in public, actually right in the middle of work?

Following an actualized reading one might discuss Stilinovic's work in connection with the Barnaby-renaissance of the previous years. Both serve as reference points for passivity, the refusal to work. Melville's anti-hero, the writing assistant Barnaby realizes his boycott not in the form of programmatic proclamations but in a stoic process of self-extracting, in the gradual withdrawal from the world of the active, from the socially decreed ratio of productivity and also from its necessary counterpart, leisure. Together with labor Bartleby also ceases the activity of reproduction through his refusal to leave the work site. Barnaby's exit is not physical, but a boycott of any interaction with the world and with himself.[9]

In contrast, Stilinovic's *Artist at Work* is marking the realm of leisure and self-

contemplation, as the place of work for the artist-subject. However, at the same time, the act of visualization, of media communication, so to say the working out of a conceptual and formal idea remains a necessary prerequisite for success. Any work that was invested in the production of the documentary material is excluded from the consideration, it remains before us as a strange dilemma, as an unresolved knot in the history of the dematerialization of artistic work.

Dalibor Martini's *Artists on Strike* (1977) consists of the unprimed back of a canvas. However, this screen has no front, but two backs. The second part of the work was a one-day *emballage* of all other works in the group exhibition (the other artists were not consulted). This enigmatic action suggests that a strike among artists is redundant because it misses the heart of the matter. Art will then, and only then, not take place where the channel of its reception is interrupted. Here, one is not under the illusion that a special declaration of cessation would terminate the artistic work, because even this proclamation, this effort of activity of non-activity, reproduces the relationship between the artist and the hegemonic context of representation. According to Martini, the true strike of the artist could only be achieved by a trick, in which the momentum of decision, the (artistic) impulse of action or even the possibility of a showing would be prohibited. In this sense, both Stilinovics and Martini's work appear as forestalled replies to Djordjevics Art Strike.

In most cases, the strike of the artists thus seems to resist its self-destructive tendencies and returns to the realm of the symbolic. The work is taken up in time for the exhibition opening.

The nature of this kind of paradoxical loop of the art strike is brought to the point in a comment found in the appendix to the last YAWN communiqué [10] by Florian Cramer a.k.a. Marty Canterel a.k.a. Keren Elyot (primarily, Cramer's text was dealing with the problem of plagiarism or falsification):

Neoism made intentional use of circular logic and turned it into rhetoric. The Art Strike is the most prominent example of this. The movement's strategy is sited herein, and not in plagiarism. This strategy is a blatantly artistic, because it creates a collective identity in place of negation and affirmation of commonly shared fiction.

However, the unmarked, silent and massive exodus, the drifting away, the emergency solutions of real life, are naturally not an artistic finger-pointing, nothing of the sort that would cause such a degree of embarrassment, shock or admiration throughout the art world as the switch of Charlotte Posonenskes to sociology, Andrea Fraser's departure in favor of a psychology degree, etc. The exit is usually so ordinary and banal, so uneventful or mundane like a bread-and-butter job or unemployment assistance. The resignation in the face of economic circumstances and their internalization as alleged subjective insufficiencies are characteristic of the bio-political and socio-economic context in which the overproduction of cognitive labor through the education-factories, competition and the precarious dependencies of creative freelance entrepreneurs are embedded. So in the irony of the "circular rhetoric" a kind of strike is accepted, yet the much more urgent question of how to deal with the so-created collective identity (Cramer) continues: What alliances are to be formed now? Who fills the strike fund?

A massive rejection of a production environment that begins to capitalize the intimate life of its subjects, the individual sensitivity, taste, characteristics, language and desires as well as the relations of social interaction appears as a logical and inevitable wave of the future. But it seems that we are still a long way off.

To be self-exiled, abandoned, is not simple passivity, is it not to be realistic? WE ALL LIVE EVICTED (sez Mike Series) [11]

Howard Slater writes the retreat in his *Secessionist International - Hello The Err* [12] a modified subtext, which seeks to repeal the individualisation inherent in the idea of exile. He formulates the exit as controlled, subjectively motivated direction of the many that he identifies as *X-O-DUS* and thus calling it the name of a mass movement: extract from slavery and foreign rule, and movement into the promised land. Exodus as a disorderly exit from the event and project-based polity of cultural life.

*EVACUATE THE EVENT: X-IT FROM PROJECT
RECONVENE ELSEWHERE: SMALL CIRCLES [13]*

Exodus is here less a spatial movement than an act of gaining communal consciousness, to be understood as self-organization of the *commune*, a call that is not exhausted on individual attention-seeking propaganda actions, but forms identities of groups (cells, hordes, cliques) that withdraw from public view, organize locally, share knowledge, make social and political bonds, which do not exhaust themselves with the performativity of temporary projects.

Tiqqun defines this as a *Human Strike* - in short, the abandoning of acquired patterns of identity, to become opaque - a strike that each and every individual can use to escape from political control, to find other ways to reach each other and create a community that is not reduced to the pre-programmed exploitation of human encounters. [14]

From now on, to be perceived means to be defeated. [15]

Footnotes:

[1] "Depression and anxiety are forms of communication. Some could say they are forms of protest. Something is retaliating, something is happening at a level that is outside our consciousness, our vocabulary, but which we have perceived, been affected by." Howard Slater: *Anomie / Bonhommie*, Mute Books, 2012, S. 116ff.

[2] <http://www.thisistomorrow.info/viewArticle.aspx?artId=260>

[3] The text was a piece from Gustav Metzger's catalog to the exhibition "Art into Society–Society into Art. Seven German Artists", Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1974.

[4] Samuel Dangel: Gustav Metzger – Jahre ohne Kunst?, in: Gustav Metzger, *Years*

Without Art, Freiburg 2012, S.37

[5] The YAWN newsletter is archived at this URL: <http://yawn.detritus.net/>

[6] <http://www.alytusbiennial.com/constitution.html>

[7] Kathrin Busch, Passivität, Textem Verlag, 2012

[8] Against Art, SKC/ Student Cultural Center, Belgrad, 1980

[9] See also: Kathrin Busch, page 53 and following. Bush emphasized, however, with recourse to Agamben's Barnaby passivity as "in the realm of possibility", in the "pure potentiality" while the auto-destructive, pathological trait of the figure remains relatively untreated.

[10] http://yawn.detritus.net/pdf/y45_c0_2171-72.pdf

[11] Howard Slater: Anomie / Bonhommie, Mute Books, 2012

[12] *ibid.*

[13] *ibid.*

[14] http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/2009/04/08/human-strike-after-human-strike/#_ftn5

[15] How is it to be done? Tiqqun