

# AFTER THE ART STRIKE

## A Field Report

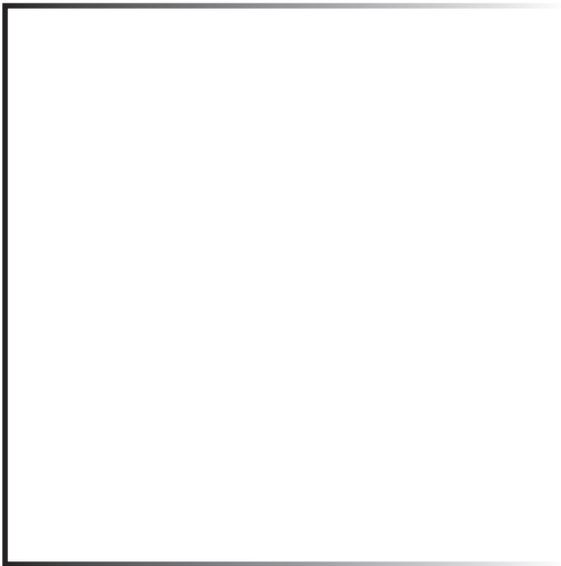
**THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION  
OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE**



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## After the Art Strike – A Field Report

The total art strike came and went. It didn't take very much to put an end to it since the strike was only total so long as all artists were willing to participate. Initially, it started as a response to the poor working conditions of many artists. Low or absent wages seeped into personal lives, joined by the expectation that artists would conveniently suffer anything "for the love of art" – that they merely worked for their own sake, driven by personal passions that made any suggestion of income irrelevant. As well as this, the common response of the art communities was to outwardly accept these conditions, which reinforced the stereotype of the passion driven artist and only resulted in more internal competition with fewer resources to be gained. It was tiring – these trite and saddening circumstances that for many seemed very opposite to what art was about, and yet governed much of what may be testingly referred to as "the art world".

Indeed, fatigue with working conditions drew many artists from many different places towards

the idea of going on strike. Still, it seemed incredible that, while the total art strike was still in its early conceptual stages, even those artists to whom poor working conditions weren't a personal issue – those who were already quite well off, those who were simply not bothered, those who thrived in competitiveness, even those who were entirely against the idea of profiting from art – decided to add their numbers to the cause. Overcoming such differences can only be attributed to a heart-warming solidarity\*, as well as to certain professional interests in the metaphysical aspects of the strike.

Apart from its stated goal of securing fair wages for all artists, one of the main appeals of the total art strike – and one that seemed to pique the interest of artists more than any other group – was the "experiment" of the situation. Unlike

\* It was rumored, though, that some artists had ulterior reasons for joining and saw in the total art strike an opportunity to pursue their own agendas. Some predicted, for example, that the strike would only succeed in making it more difficult for artists to get paid – a prospect that could have seemed appealing to those who were anti-profit. But then, this is pure speculation.

with many other kinds of workers' strikes, no one knew for certain what the total art strike would bring. People wanted to see what actually would happen when artists laid down tools, went on strike, stopped working with art. What was even meant by such terms as "artist" and "working with art" was up to the individual to decide. "Artist" would refer to anyone who identified with the title, thus disregarding any divisions between disciplines, media, conventions of high and low culture, etc. For some artists, the process of working with art could be easily confined (for example to "time spent in the studio" or "when paint is added to the canvas"), but for others it proved far more complicated. Talking about art was by many considered inseparable from the process of making it, and those who held more holistic views were facing difficulties – eating, walking, dreaming, etc. were to them as much a part of the process as anything else. Overall, however, the total art strike manifested as follows: The production of new art came to a halt, as did all distribution, performing, and selling of art that involved the consent of artists. There were no new shows or events to prepare, no openings or releases

to attend, no funding to apply for, nothing new to admire or criticize, no money to be made – there was (at least physically) an absence of art.

Prior to the strike, different speculations were floating around concerning what impact this absence of art was going to have on society. Some guessed that people would eventually suffer from cultural and intellectual starvation, some proposed that the resources previously spent on art might be used to significantly boost general welfare, some declared that the worst victims of the strike would certainly be the artists themselves, many expected that art would be reasonably missed, and so on. Underlying these guesses was the core postulation of the strike: Only by removing art might it be possible to reveal its actual value to society. And depending on what that value actually was, the goals of the strike would hopefully be met in turn.

Artists also had a vested interest in seeing what impact the absence of art might have on themselves. Namely, they wished to test, and presumably disprove, the notion of artists working "for the love of art". Many of the speculations surrounding

the impact of the strike on society therefore also applied to artists themselves: Would artists suffer from cultural or intellectual starvation, would their well-being improve as a result of not making art, would they really be the only ones to miss it, would they even miss it at all. On a practical level, the total art strike had an entirely direct effect on the lives of many people in that it freed up however much time anyone would otherwise have spent on art. Some suggested that whatever artists might do to occupy their newfound time might prove to be more worthwhile than art, might serve their interests more successfully. What can be said generally in this regard is that artists largely spent their free time on things they were already doing anyway, which, it goes without saying, were manifold. The formation of the total art strike did seem to prove that artists were indeed capable of putting aside any personal passions for art at least for a limited period of time. However, ultimately artists were also the ones to end the strike. Whether it was out of their own passion for art or out of concern for others cannot truthfully be known.

While the experiment of the total art strike far from answered or fulfilled all of the speculations that surrounded it, it did result in certain outcomes, some of which might seem predictable in hindsight. For example, one aspect of the experiment concerned the notion that artists are often perceived as separate from the rest of society – whether secluded in ivory towers or exiled to circus tents. It had been speculated that in the absence of art, this division might start to dissipate. Meanwhile, rather the opposite happened. Never before could the term "artist" be used so categorically as during the total art strike – everyone who participated in the strike was by default an artist and everyone who didn't was not. Likewise, since there was now no new art being made, the category of art as something that requires the license of an artist was only further reinforced. Art was something that artists used to make before the strike and could reinstitute if the strike were to come to an end.

In society, the absence of art only reinforced its presence; in fact, neither art nor artists received more media coverage and public attention

in history than during the strike. Chronicles detailed its events, essays juggled various historical notions of the value of art, interviews with artists flooded the social media, philosophers climbed soap boxes. Art was debated heavily, not least in manners for or against. Figureheads duelled on tv while user comments shot back and forth between broadband cables. Politicians seemed baffled at first, but soon picked up on the opportunities presented by the strike. Some at least pretended to support the cause and portrayed themselves as the heroes of culture, the finer details of which they had much trouble articulating. Mostly, however, politicians spoke of the strike as "realists" who were pro art, but would have artists stop being silly and start making do with the status quo – or as financial evolutionists who would watch unflinchingly as the failure of the strike brought the artist race closer to extinction. Much hot air was vented.

However, what eventually led to the dismantling of the total art strike was, in fact, an argument that arose in the debates surrounding it. Ironically, the argument was initially put forth by supporters of

the strike, as a response to the financial growth rhetoric that dominated much of the debate surrounding the strike, and was actually in defense of art in general rather than the strike specifically. The argument was quite simply that the value of art is as unpredictable as art itself and that any attempt to prognosticate that value builds on a misconception of what art is. It was not quite a new argument, but it rang fresh in the context of the total art strike, because it accidentally revealed the basic flaw of the strike, namely: By removing art, the total art strike had also removed any chance of grasping its value. Practically speaking, there was no true way of knowing whatever art might have been made during the period of the strike if it weren't for the strike itself. It seemed entirely impossible to deny the fact that something might have been made that could have been greatly important. At its core, the total art strike could prove nothing about the value of art and, furthermore, it continued to directly obstruct any value that art might bring. This was of course somewhat of an embarrassment to the participants in the strike, but simultaneously the unpredictability of art presented an excellent

reason for working with it in the first place. Not long after this realization, the strike fell apart immediately – that is, artists returned to work.

The total art strike was in several ways a total failure. When it fell apart it had not achieved its goal of securing fair wages for all artists. It did, however, at least temporarily change the game of the art world in that all competition among artists – friends, colleagues, and strangers – was terminated during the strike. But most importantly, what the total art strike showed, against all expectation, was that artists were capable of coming together in massive, collective efforts. Artists were not merely a haphazard bunch of individuals in pursuit of their own recognition; they had shared interests and were actually capable of mobilizing on huge scales to take action. This awareness is what has remained after the collapse of the total art strike and is characteristic of so much art we see today.

Here follows a list that is far from comprehensive, but strives to provide an insight into "post-strike" art by going over some of the bigger and arguably most impactful projects to date. Any overview of

an art movement, period, or ism, is always selective in its attempt to bring to light certain trends, ideas, common ideologies, etc. and necessarily neglects parts of the bigger picture. This list, though mainly observational, is no different since its focus is on the collective projects (meanwhile, there are still artists who work individually and, of course, some of those even do so in opposition to the collectivist movements). Furthermore, none of the projects described here are chosen purely for their sensational value – a currency that has been rather abundant in the post-strike art scene, but is not the point of interest in these examples. Lastly, it should also be mentioned that the list does not credit any individual artist involved in any of the projects, as their numbers are far too many to be recounted.





## **The Robin Hood Project**

The Robin Hood Project deserves an early mention as it is quite emblematic of the funding strategies used to realize much of the art that has followed in the wake of the strike. Due to the often quite massive scale of post-strike art and the financial costs it involves, many projects have only been made possible through the mass organized funding efforts we now all know as "bombardment" – that is, when the thousands upon thousands of people involved in a given project all enter independent applications for the same project to private and public funds. As one of the earliest post-strike projects and the first to utilize the bombardment strategy, The Robin Hood Project was rather inventive. In short, an exceedingly large number of artists applied for funding for the project, which, however, involved no production costs at all. Rather, all resources received would be portioned out to artists in need. The aim of The Robin Hood Project was, in other words, to reroute the money – away from project specific art and towards artists, who would then use it as they saw fit. Perhaps not surprisingly, people mostly spent the money on making art

anyway – only, this time they didn't need to write any applications.

## **Hide**

Picking up on one of trails of the total art strike, Hide is a more extreme, if less extensive in number of participants, experiment in the absence of art – or, in particular, of artists. The plan for Hide was simple: Its participants agreed on a specific date and time (it was a Tuesday at 14.00 GMT, which held no special significance) where they would all simultaneously go into hiding, or, as completely as possible, disappear. Apart from this starting point, however, nothing else was planned in advance for the course of Hide – what its participants should do while in hiding, and when, how, or if they should re-emerge. Some have made a very big splash of their return – materializing from flames and fireworks or landing in airships – while others have returned quite unnoticeably. Some only hid for a very short time indeed, retiring from the project after mere hours or minutes. Others came out of hiding after months or years, while many have yet to come out at all. Some of those who have re-emerged more recently tell tales of

tribe-like communities of artists living in forests or underground, quite literally. The direct, social impact of Hide is not nearly as great as that of the narratives it produces, which simultaneously enforce and deflate the general idea of artists living in seclusion or exile.

### **The Bond**

Social art went big with The Bond, a project that launched in the early months following the collapse of the total art strike and has since grown to be the largest organized group of artists since the strike itself. Initially called Superrelational Aesthetics, the project consisted of various big scale life/art mergers, but eventually settled on another name and purpose: The Bond would work for the improvement of social welfare, especially that of minorities and other particularly vulnerable groups. The main force of The Bond lies in its numbers (there are currently millions of members across continents) as well as the extremely varied backgrounds of its members whose collective expertise approaches the exhaustive. All members are artists, but since artists may also be a ton of other things, The Bond

includes scores of doctors, farmers, logisticians, entrepreneurs, pilots, chefs, smiths, soldiers, teachers, drivers, biologists, historians, journalists, politicians, spies, engineers, shippers, bankers, secretaries, programmers, carpenters, etc. ad infinitum (almost). The professional resources of The Bond and the worldwide distribution of its very many members allow the project to act on almost any social problem, be it a sudden disaster calling for immediate aid or deep-rooted conflicts demanding local presence over extended periods of time. Since The Bond performs the same functions as many non-art organizations, the project (which is partly financed by arts funding) is often scorned as being faux art. The majority vote, however – namely that of The Bond’s many members – begs to differ and is anyway more concerned with other issues, chiefly those it seeks to solve. While The Bond is generally very successful in its operations, one concern has existed since the beginnings of the project and still remains: Are the activities of The Bond an excuse for other responsible parties to neglect the issues to which the project attends? The success of The Bond has to some extent resulted in reduced efforts by other social welfare

organizations – where their resources go instead is not at all transparent.

## **Land**

Post-strike art has seen its share of sensational projects and Guinness World Records nominees – bigger sculptures, thicker books, longer concerts – that have, apart from their impressive size or duration, essentially remained fairly conventional. Judging by recent developments in "big art", however, post-strike art may be falling out of its infatuation with the purely sensational. Land, at least, is an example of a project whose scope is used not just for sensational effect, but goes to challenge some of the institutional conventions of, specifically, pre-strike modern art. Land is located in central Iceland and covers 25 square kilometers. It is composed of 250.000 identical, cubic spaces with white walls, but without floors or ceilings so the lava ground below and the sky above are exposed. Openings connect each white, cubic space with the adjacent ones and it is possible to walk through all of them, although it would take a very long time. The reason why Land is significant is that no one is quite sure what it really exhibits:

Is it the contents of the white, cubic spaces, or is it the white cube tradition of pre-strike modern art itself? Is the landscape institutionalized or is it wearing down the institution of the white cube? Is it land art, institutional critique, both, or something else? Land is, in a way, both its own frame and contents, and while it is something we haven't exactly seen before, its atmosphere is one of parting with the past.

### **The Place**

The Place actually consists of many different places. Intended as the most inclusive scene for any type of art, it looks most of all like a small city. One-room poetry venues pop up next to Guggenheimish museums that are contrasted with anti-modern Wunderkammers and gritty noise bunkers. Aside from what art goes on in The Place, the place itself provides an interesting catalogue of institutional containers that are picked out by artists rather than art workers. The catalogue, furthermore, is always changing as new places are added to The Place. As an act of commitment, The Place is to host an upcoming "millenniale", which, after its inauguration, is to be held only

once every thousand years and will show art by whoever is currently alive at that time.

### **The Commission of Aesthetic Infiltration**

After a thorough development process, The Commission of Aesthetic Infiltration opened officially within the second year following the total art strike and remains one of the strongest post-strike organization-cum-art-projects to date. The Commission performs two major functions with one overall goal in mind: to infiltrate, in civil or professional ways, certain fields that are deemed to be lacking in aesthetic intelligence. "Aesthetic intelligence", according to The Commission, is "the ability to actually imagine scenarios that are not presently at hand – to relate to the experience of imagined scenarios and not merely see them as symbolic, universal, or pragmatic." The first function of The Commission is to deliver an overview of aesthetically unintelligent fields: The general research department publishes reviews of the current aesthetic state of science, politics, economy, military operations, etc., while the futurological department provides a forecast of fields that will likely have continued or increasingly

great human consequences in times to come. For example, The Commission currently emphasizes the importance of aesthetic infiltration in fields such as the development of artificial intelligence (especially ASI – strong artificial intelligence), human genome modification, space transport and the colonization of other planets, climate change awareness, and, unsurprisingly, certain staples such as economy, politics, military operations, and national intelligence. In its research, The Commission encourages artists, and anyone else, to independently pursue the infiltration of such fields in whatever civil manner is seen fit. The second function of The Commission is to actually facilitate aesthetic infiltration – primarily by helping to position artists or groups of artists in aesthetically unintelligent fields on a case-by-case basis. For example, artists may request assistance in jumping up the job ladder of a specific company in order to reach a position of some influence, or, more simply, to have private meetings arranged with specific, prominent persons with whom they may try to reason. But The Commission has perhaps been most successful on an institutional level: By helping artists set up research centres,

laboratories, banks, businesses, media channels, etc., The Commission has fostered a culture of independent alternatives that rival their competition in power and represent a more aesthetically intelligent outlook.

### **The Great Parade**

The Great Parade, as is its popular name, is perhaps more of a post-strike phenomenon than a project; it was supposedly never really thought of as a "project" to begin with and still isn't by many of its participants. It started when a group of artists set out walking in one direction without any specific goal. While their doing so has been given no clear reason, it is poetically speculated that the absence of art during the total art strike revealed a longing in their hearts that art could never fill, inspiring their uncertain journey. Over the years, The Great Parade has grown in numbers; there still is no set goal for the walk, but wherever it passes more people join in. Some of the artists in The Great Parade insist that they are participating in an art project; whether or not the case, this seems to cause no strife in The Great Parade, which walks onwards regardlessly.

## **Getting Together**

Conceptually one of the simplest post-strike projects so far, Getting Together has also proven to be one of the most tasking to realize; so far, its preparations have lasted for over two and a half years and the end does not seem close in sight. The openly naive idea of the project is simply to gather all artists in the same place – for one thing, to see how many there are, since nobody really knows. One of the primary challenges in realizing the project is the fact that it competes for participants with a number of other huge, collective projects, some of which occupy artists permanently. The all-or-nothing attitude of Getting Together is characteristic of a fair portion of post-strike art and is worth mentioning for its more ominous dimension: A project like Getting Together seems to border on a very thin line between collectivism and totalitarianism. The project relies on the willing participation of no less than all artists, which it has not found; meanwhile, that doesn't seem to deter its organizers who seem convinced that their plans will come to fruition. It will be interesting to see if the project must eventually shut down, if it will transform into something of

a lesser scale, or if its planning phase will go on eternally.

### **Vault**

While Vault is by far the largest (secure) collection of art in the world, its function is mainly storage. The very practical purpose of Vault is to provide a place for artists to stuff those works that are in one way or the other in the way – whether because of their value, their irrelevance, their fragility, their size, their addictiveness, their traumas, etc. As such, Vault is quite useful to many artists and is frequently undergoing expansions; however, as a way to simultaneously get rid off and hold on to art, Vault comes with a warning: "EVERYTHING CHANGES" (as is written in cast titanium letters above its entrances).

### **Hole**

Not far from Vault lies its counterpart – Hole – the title of which is most literal. Hole is a hole in the ground with a diameter of about 300 meters and a depth of about 500 meters. Simultaneously, Hole is the largest collection of art by any standard, but it is far from secure and the word "collection"

is probably misleading. Hole represents a place to let go of art completely by, quite simply, tossing it into the hole that is Hole (where tossing is unfeasible, cranes and catapults can be provided). The first weeks after the official opening of Hole saw a layer of almost 50 meters of art filling up at its bottom – contributions have since slowed down considerably, but still accumulate a steady 2 meters per month. As Hole is filling up, its bottom layers of art are starting to disintegrate and will eventually become indistinguishable from the soil around them. As such, nothing in Hole ever truly disappears – rather, it is a place where art is physically, as well as semantically, transformed.

### **Dark Art**

Anonymous Art is perhaps the most widespread expression of collectivism in art to appear from the ashes of the total art strike. The phenomenon is represented by thousands of groups worldwide who go by such names as HyperWork, nexUS, or, plainly, ART, and whose members all work anonymously in the name of their respective group. Anonymous Art currently enjoys very considerable popular success, which owes itself

partly to the massive amounts of art each group is able to present from its collective members – as well as to a great interest in collectivism or anti-individualism in general. Not all groups welcome this success, however, as it is seen to interfere with some of their main intentions with working anonymously. Most importantly, Anonymous Art seeks to steer attention away from the individuals who make art and towards art itself; however, with the air of mystique that often comes with their anonymous profiles, the groups themselves can just as easily as any individual become center of attention, become fetishized and mythologized. The one group that lends itself most to fetish and mythology, however, is the one that has certainly done least in the way of profiling its anonymity – and which might not exist. Dubbed Dark Art, this proposed group of anonymous artists is by some speculated to be a highly organized and somewhat clandestine affair, while others insist that there is no group and that Dark Art is the spontaneous, collective expression of the desire for autonomy. Basis for all speculation is the immense increase in art that seems to come out of nowhere and bears no signature of any kind. Dark Art appears in

streets, forests, museums, airplanes, offices, toilets, zoos, space, playgrounds, battlefields, refrigerators, nightclubs, etc. Whether or not there actually is some organized group behind Dark Art, the recognition of the phenomenon at all does suggest one thing: The desire for art that is unbound by the conventions of "the art world" lives on in the time after the total art strike.



