

# Cultural Workers, Throw Down Your Tools The Metropolis Is On Strike

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*“The unrest of change, assuming theatrical form as a spectacle, transforms the city into a penultimate opportune occasion for mastering unrest itself ... The impermanence of the city affirms the active capacity of the collective to be self-fashioning and, simultaneously, its anomic recognition of the perishable character of all that comes to be, showing in this way the limits of a finitude which is typically celebrated for its works and achievements, while being denigrated for its failure to master creation itself.”* Alan Blum<sup>1</sup>

Gazing down upon the city, looking at the development of the metropolis, one is struck by many things. Perhaps one of the more obvious, regardless of what one thinks of the process that led to its development, is that it's often rather ugly. Not just in the way it looks (jungles of concrete and steel), but even more so in what it does: how the city operates as a factory, isolating people from each other, channelling social relations into prescribed routes

and preventing others from forming, transforming our relationship with nature, and so on. David Harvey, the renowned Marxist geographer, responded to this observation with the comment that it was “really quite a strange thing that the bourgeois has no imagination”, no sense of creativity that can devise anything more appealing in its domination and transformation of the social space and the urban environment. This may seem a minor point or trite observation. What does it matter how aesthetically appealing, how well designed or not, an area is, when there are more crucial questions and ongoing issues of communities being displaced, workers being exploited, and the nature of social life being shaped by the needs of capital? This is true enough to a degree. But what is interesting about such an observation is the process it hints at and what this can tell us about the development of capitalism today<sup>2</sup> and our struggles to shape social life and interactions otherwise.

Whether or not the bourgeois has any creativity is debatable (Marx himself marvelled at the inventiveness of the ruling class in transforming social reality, albeit usually for the worse); this is not so important precisely because the bourgeois is so skilled at stealing the imagination and creativity of others. And this is precisely what the history of the transformations of the city and society more generally show us. Social and political movements, new artistic developments and quarters, as soon as they arise (or even before they arise sometimes) are seized upon by real estate developers, urban planners and policymakers to create the image of a new ‘hip’ district that will boost real estate prices, attract ‘more desirable’ residents and so forth, in a virtuous spiral of capitalist development. This process of gentrification led by or inadvertently spurred by developments in artistic and social creativity is an old one. When Albert Parry wrote his history of Bohemia in the US,<sup>3</sup> he paid close attention to the relation between artists and the rise of the real estate market in the 60s and 70s. But in Parry's case the decades in question were the 1860s and 1870s rather than the rise of loft living, to borrow Sharon Zukin's description of the reshaping of lower Manhattan during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The point of raising this is not to sulk over this process or

mourn that so much creative energy fermented by often–antagonistic social movements gets turned into mechanisms for further accumulation. Rather the question is making sense out of it, and making sense in a way that further clarifies this process for political and social organising.

In recent years there has emerged within radical theory and organising coming out of Europe, Italy and France specifically, a focus on the metropolis as both a space of capitalist production and resistance to it. This is based on an argument developed over many years within autonomous social movements, that we live in the social factory, that exploitation does not just occur within the bounded workplace, but increasingly comes to involve all forms of social interactions that are brought into the labour process. In the social factory our abilities to communicate, to relate, to create and imagine, all are put to work, sometimes through digital networks and communications, or through their utilisation as part of a redevelopment or revitalisation of an area based on the image of being a creative locale. Given this argument it becomes possible to look at the rise of the discourse of the creative city and the creative class, most popularly associated with its development by Richard Florida and then seized upon by large numbers of urban planners and developers. The rise of the idea of the creative class is not just a theorisation of the changing nature of economic production and social structure, it is, or at very least has become, a managerial tool and justification for a restructuring of the city space as a factory space.

But to read Florida’s arguments, such as in *The Rise of the Creative Class* or *Cities and the Creative Class*, is to encounter a very strange managerial tool.<sup>5</sup> It is quite strange in that while at face value his work seems to describe empirical phenomena, namely the development of an increase in prominence of forms of labour that are primarily premised on creating new ideas and forms rather than physical labour, whether that is actually the case or not is not the main issue. The creative class is not a homogenous or unified whole but is itself, even in Florida’s description, marked by an uneven development of the forms of creative labour engaged in (for instance, distinguishing a ‘super creative’ core of science, arts and media workers from

the ‘creative professionals’ and knowledge workers who keep the necessary organisational structures running). It is not then that they necessarily describe an empirical reality or condition – the existence of the creative city – but rather a form of mythological social technology of governance: bringing it into being by declaring its existence. In other words, the question is not whether the creative class exists as such, but rather what effects are created through how it is described and called into being through forms of governance and social action based upon these claims. Planning and shaping the city around a certain conceptualisation of the creative potentiality of labour, or the potentiality of creativity put to work, is not an unprecedented or unique development, but rather is the latest example of capital’s attempt to continually valorise itself through recuperating the energies of those organising against it.

The argument that all of society and social relations are being brought into economic production leaves out a crucial question, namely what are the particular means and technologies through which social relations are made productive. How are aspects of social life outside the recognised workplace brought into the labour process? What are the technologies of capture that render the metropolis productive? This is precisely what the creative class is, a social position that formalises the process of drawing from the collective wealth and creativity of the metropolis, and turns it into a mechanism for further capitalist development. It is what Zukin describes as the advent of an “artistic mode of production” where mixed residency and industrial space usage enacts the intermingling of art and life, and from that the dispersal of work all throughout life. In the industrial factory it was generally easy to clearly distinguish between those who planned and managed the labour process (the managers) and those who were involved in its execution (the managed), between the owners and professionals and the subordinate labourers who were of interest only for their ability to work and not for their ideas. But in today’s post–industrial service economy these distinctions become increasingly hard to make. The passionate and self–motivated labour of the artisan has increasingly become the model for a self–disciplining,

self-managed form of labour force that works harder, longer and often for less pay precisely because of its attachment to some degree of personal fulfilment in the forms of work engaged in (or a “psychic wage” as Marc Bousquet refers to it<sup>6</sup>).

To use the language developed by autonomist movements, what we see in the rise of the creative class, both as empirical description and as discourse for the management and shaping of the city, is a shifting of class composition. Class composition is made of two characteristics: technical composition, or the mechanisms and arrangements capital uses for its continued reproduction, and political composition, or the ability of ongoing struggles and movements to assert their own needs and desires and to shape the conditions of the existing economic and political reality. The rise of the creative class was formed by a convergence of a set of dynamics including demands by workers for more fulfilling kinds of humane and engaging labour rather than repetitive meaningless tasks. The rejection of the factory line and factory discipline that emerged during the late 1960s was met during the 1970s by managerial attempts to create jobs that were more fully engaging for the workers, but also more fully exploited their labouring capacity. Similarly, campaigns of community organising and neighbourhood renewal undertaken by social movements around the same time (such as in the lower east side of New York) were then used by financially backed real estate speculation to kick start a renewed process of capital accumulation based on land values. The point of identifying and analysing these relations of social contestation and capitalism is not to lament them, but rather, when one thinks about them compositionally, which is to say looking at relations between contestation and accumulation, to understand how the city functions as an expanded factory space and broadens the terrain for disrupting capitalist domination of social life.

What this comes down to is the realisation that capital depends on a certain kind of glide for its continued development. Capital is not real. It has no body and certainly no imagination. It can create nothing on its own. Rather

what capital increasingly relies on today is the movement of ideas and creativity through networks of social relations, co-operation and communication that are already in existence. What capital needs is a process through which this dispersed creativity already in circulation can be harvested and put to work in renewed production of surplus value. The bourgeois then exists not in the form of factory owner, the one who owns the means of production, but rather in the figure that renders the diffuse productivity of the metropolitan factory into forms that can be exploited. Capital is reproduced through profit making that has become rent: by attempting to restrict access to this social creativity rather than through its ownership. The creative class and its dispersal through the rise of the creative city/cluster is the process through which the siphoning off of social imagination is managed, the way that the pleasure of being in common becomes the labour of living together.

Understanding how capital attempts to turn its glide through social space into capturing profits does not mean that there are no options left for interrupting and breaking these circuits of accumulation. If anything the number of points where capitalism is open to disruption have multiplied exponentially. In so far as we are engaged in the labour of circulation and imagination necessary to keep a parasitic economy alive, we are also located precisely at the point where it is possible to refuse to continue to do so. The subversive potentiality of any creative art or artistic production then is not simply its expressed political content, but rather the potentiality it creates for interrupting the circuits of capitalist production that it is always already enmeshed in. In the metropolitan factory the cultural worker who thinks that she is autonomous simply because there is no foreman barking orders is just as capable of having her passionate labour co-opted, perhaps all the more deeply in so far as the labourer’s discipline is self-imposed and thus made partially imperceptible. Through understanding the social technologies that render the city a unified social fabric of production, it becomes possible to develop further strategies of refusal and resistance that find avenues for creative sabotage and disruption throughout the city.

## Reconsidering the Art Strike

“*The art of the future is not connoisseurship, but labour itself transfigured.*”  
Nikolai Tarabukin<sup>7</sup>

What then is to be done, when it seems that there is nothing to be done? How is it possible to recompose strategies for social movement and subversion within the space of a metropolitan factory that has found ways to turn the practices of antagonistic cultural production into levers of further accumulation of capital? Perhaps the question becomes less one of ‘what is to be done’ and more one of ‘what is to be undone’, or action through antagonistic not doing; in short, to reconsider the notion of the strike for cultural labour.

“Everyone is an artist.” This would seem a simple enough place to begin; with a statement connecting directly to Joseph Beuys<sup>8</sup> and, more generally, to the historic avant-garde’s aesthetic politics that sought 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 organising. But let’s pause for a second. While seemingly simple, there is much more to this one statement than presents itself. It is a 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, in reconsidering its compositional potential.

The first notion alludes to a kind of potentiality present but unrealised through artistic work; the creativity that everyone could exercise if they realised and developed potentials that have been held back and stunted by capital and unrealistic conceptions of artistic production due to 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.

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 realised in existing forms of diffuse cultural production. “Everyone is an artist” as a utopian possibility is realised just as “everyone is a worker”. This condition has reached a new degree of concentration and intensity within the basins of cultural production; in 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 labour around them, whether as artistic labour or just labour itself.

The notion of the Art Strike, its reconsideration and socialisation within the post-Fordist economy, becomes more interesting and productive (or perhaps anti-productive) precisely as labour changes articulation in relation to the current composition of artistic and cultural work. The Art Strike starts with the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) and Gustav Metzger

and their calls to withdraw their labour. First the AWC called for a strike in 1969 to protest the involvement of museum board members and trustees in war-related industries, as explored brilliantly by Julia Bryan-Wilson.<sup>9</sup> Gustav Metzger then called for a strike of a minimum of three years, from 1977–80, although he noted that almost no one noticed (which is perhaps not so surprising when you go on strike by yourself). Metzger and the AWC's formulation of the Art Strike was directed against the problems of the gallery system. This conception was picked up by Stewart Home<sup>10</sup> and various others within the Neoist milieu who called upon artists to cease artistic work entirely for the years 1990–93. 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<sup>11</sup> called for an Art Strike 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 valorisation through the 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 labour 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 labour 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 labour 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,<sup>12</sup> argues that far from going on a strike by withdrawing forms of artistic labour, the Art Strike formed as the ultimate realisation 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 labour 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 sceptics, how can we enact this form of strike? And, as comrades and allies inquire, how can this subsumption of creativity and imagination

by capital be undone? That is precisely the problem, for as artistic and social field, they are rendered all the more 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 reconsidered and reworked. How can we struggle around or organise diffuse forms of cultural and artistic labour? This is precisely the kind of question explored by groups such as the Carrotworkers' Collective,<sup>13</sup> a group from London who are formulating ways to organise around labour 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*” (“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 labour refusal have become rendered into the workings of semiocapitalism and the metropolitan factory. To renew and rebuild a politics and form of social movement adequate to the current composition does not start from romanticising 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.

1. Alan Blum, *The Imaginative Structure of the City* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) pp. 232–233.
2. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

3. Albert Parry, *Garretts & Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (New York: Cosmo, 1960).
4. Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
5. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
6. Marc Bousquet, *How The University Works* (New York: NYU, 2008).
7. Quoted in Branka Kuric, *Ideology of Design* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2010) p. 242.
8. 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', *Artforum*, June 1967.
9. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
10. Stewart Home, *The Neoist Manifestos / The Art Strike Papers* (Stirling: AK Press, 1991).
11. Art Strike Biennial, <http://www.alytusbiennial.com>.
12. Bob Black, 'The Refusal of Art', in *Friendly Fire* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992).
13. Carrotworkers' Collective, <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com>.