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The 3 R's: Readin', 'Ritin', Recession

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During the 1988 presidential campaign, then Vice-President George H.W. Bush announced that he would be the "education president."

In early 1992, on a trade mission to another country, President Bush proclaimed he was the "jobs president." With the 1992 presidential campaign in full swing, he once again announced he was the "education president." According to a Washington Post story, a photo opportunity was planned at a high school in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Books were piled in front of the lectern, and "art teacher Barbara Wehr was busy making a 2 by 2 foot papier-mâché apple the White House wanted to place beside Bush when he gave his speech." The heading read "Critics skeptical as Bush returns to school."ⁱ

With the recent downturn in the economy, long-held cultural truisms have lost the ring of truth. "Get a good education" has been the prerequisite to "get a good job." The implication was that by fulfilling steps one and two, step three would follow: "have a good life." We have believed in guarantees that don't really exist. The faltering economy has shaken those beliefs by exposing the lack of substance beneath them. Education and jobs are interchangeable pawns in campaign speeches, the props changing with each photo opportunity. As the political and educational systems fail and unemployment rises, cynical skepticism has replaced tentative faith.

For artists, the relationship between art, education and the job market has always been tenuous. They look for a way to effect a balance between their jobs (paychecks) and their work (art). Some wend their way through art school degrees; others find schooling to be a hindrance. To teach, to design, to market, to consult or to choose a completely separate field are ongoing and difficult considerations for most artists.

While there are artists who are able to combine their art and careers, there are those that argue adamantly for the separation of the two. **The Years Without Art, 1990-1993**ⁱⁱ by the **Art Strike Action Committee** of Iowa City has put together a booklet manifesto, which sets forth the premise of the international Art Strike movement. The Art Strike calls for artists, as cultural workers, "to put down their tools and cease to make, distribute, sell, exhibit, or discuss their work" for a three-year period which began January 1, 1990. The manifesto also calls on art institutions, schools and galleries to suspend operation during that time. The Art Strike was planned in 1985 by the PRAXIS group. It is not a coincidence that those strike-planning years were the years of the art boom. Proponents of Reaganomics, entrepreneurs, art marketers and many artists shifted the emphasis from art issues to financial issues. Auction houses floated mega-loans to buyers of extravagantly priced artworks from those same auctioneers. Art as investment was the guide- good, bad, worthy, challenging, intriguing- none of that mattered. The contemporary artists who were best able to ride that bandwagon were the ones who

were best at marketing themselves. Jeff Koons did a series of glossy magazine ads of himself, complete with perfectly made-up face, exotic settings and models in bikinis. He presented himself as an iconic commodity, as slick as his art goods. A quote from the manifesto by Gary Indiana succinctly summed up those ads and the attitude they engendered: "Capitalism has turned not only art but our bodies into commodities. The only real originality of the 80's is that our bodies and lives are all that there's left to consume." LeRoy Neiman, a prolific master of the art business, is quoted as saying, "The art business like any business, is full of phonies, pimps and gunrunners. All that vision and talent shit is just advertising." It is no wonder that the Art Strike Action Committee has found much to take action against. It is also no wonder that those who rode that boom wagon have a response. Said Julian Schnabel, "The architects of the Art Strike want to force everyone else to emulate their own lack of success. They're promoting lazy café intellectualism as a political ideal." The fact that Schnabel had any reaction at it at all is telling- if he were comfortable in the position he speaks from, he could have ignored the whole thing.

The Strike is a call for inaction, rather than action. It is an attempt to not necessarily solve problems, but to cause them by challenging the social hierarchy. This is a contemporary art revolution based on the political revolutions of the late 1960's. That earlier revolution helped to bring about numerous changes in the art hierarchy as well: moving art out of the museum walls to alternative, cooperative and public sites; the loosening of the strict categories of each artistic discipline; artists circumventing gallery distribution by taking control of the dissemination of their own work, particularly with artists' books and video; the negation of the preciousness of the art commodity with found or everyday materials. All of these things are commonplace now, and indeed have come full circle. Alternative galleries look and operate much like the commercial galleries they were meant to replace, public art often offers little to the public, everything is a commodity. Willem deKooning's painted toilet seat was sold for a hefty price at an art auction; mail art pieces come through the mail with a rubber stamp NOT FOR SALE in an attempt to halt the marketing of those items. According to the manifesto, creativity is not dependent on the title "artist" or art school degrees or commercial status marks. Creativity is in fact burdened by these signs, at the same time that they deny the vision of others. Therefore the Art Strike equates the art system as we know it with PATRONATE/EXCLUSION/CAREERISM/ALIENATION/IMPOTENCE.

It is important to note that the Art Strike is not about just the art world, but the global world too. The manifesto implicates aesthetics as the mask that hides real life, the unaesthetic, the not pleasing. Towards the end of the book there are a series of questions and answers: "Is this a joke? Absolutely not. How can you have shows when some people don't even have shoes?" The Strike proposes to exhaust multiple systems that are corrupt and/or corrupting. Intrinsic to their argument is the belief that art is not separate from politics, education, the economy or life itself. Effecting change in one area will necessitate change in others.

This is not the first time we have heard these words, either for art or social issues. The Dadaists had a similar call; Karl Marx's words are also echoed in the Art Strike manifesto. Fred Lonidier echoed Marx's treatise on religion in another work for a mail art show in 1988ⁱⁱⁱ. Lonidier, a San Diego photographer whose work is centered on labor issues, replaced a key work in Marx's dictum:

The abolition of ART as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.

The current recession is causing many people to abandon some conditions which require illusions, and to replace them with others. For so long the American dream has included education, employment and an enhanced life style. They still may be part of the dream, but for many they are no longer a possible reality. The Art Strike calls for organized inaction. In many ways, that is happening by default. The low voter turnout in the presidential primaries speaks of the rampant disappointment in not just the electoral system, but also our national institutions. A number of elected representatives have decided to resign their posts because even they are disappointed in their inability to get things moving again. For all its negative bravado, the Art Strike does actually dare to dream a different reality. It is a plea for personal and political change.

Where the Art Strike book examines the relationships among cultural workers, culture and the economy, there are artists for whom those are personal issues and the subject of their work. Janis Krasnow presents a number of career options in her offset booklet, **HOW TO GET A JOB, AND WHAT JOB TO GET**^{iv}. This is a bare bones, shorthand version of **WHAT COLOR IS YOUR PARACHUTE?**, the ubiquitous career development guidebook. Simple personality traits are matched to a job. Unlike Parachute, this book does not assume that everyone wants a white-collar desk job. The list includes such pairings as: resourceful-computer operator; committed-activist; presentable-lobby doorman. The stark black on white printing is emphatic, and the hand-lettered words are clunky. They draw attention to themselves as individual letterforms because they are not slick. They are a reminder of learning how to write letters when the act of writing itself was labor. The work of figuring out how to do it is the issue, whether it is writing or getting a job. Factored into this is the process of self-evaluation, "What do I do best? How can I turn that into a job?" The final pairing of the book reads as a provocative punch line to that question: fertile-surrogate mother. Had it been placed among the other pairings, this one would be more benign. But it is the only one that begins with a body description rather than a personal ability. And just as it is the last listing, it is also for some a last resort.

One career option often chosen by artists is waitressing. It is common enough that in a few of his novels, Tom Robbins' female lead characters are artists/waitresses from Seattle. They form their own granting association to buy each other time away from the job to do their own work. The characters in Susan Baker's book are exactly the kind of customers from whom Robbins' waitresses are trying to escape. **DON'T BUG THE WAITRESS: IN MEMORY OF THE WOMAN WHO ORDERED A CUP OF HOT WATER + A PLATE**^v includes short character studies of bad customers. The Macro Neurotic is a health food nut who smokes at the end of the meal; The Bore targets an unsuspecting group of dining tourists in order to share his life story; The Snapper expects service the instant her fingers snap. The silkscreen book is a folder-like assembly, with yellow and white inserts in blue pockets. Like an eclectic menu at a not-yet-trendy café, the reader/diner is never quite sure what's next- the chef's choice or the daily surprise. The simple, comic-style illustrations and the bright, flat colors enable Baker to set forth harsher expressions such as "a regular is just a regular pain in the

ass” or “a waitress is halfway between a shrink + a hooker.” All of the information reads like a tragic/comic list of waitress gripes, shared not only with each other but with the customers too. The final page is a list just for the customers: the 10 Restaurant Commandments, from “Never sit at a dirty table” to “Don’t ask to change the music,” the commandments are actually admonishments to the many diners who expect fantastic service from people they treat as if were invisible.

Moving from gripes to tips, **YOUR FUTURE IN WAITRESSING: BASIC STEPS TO FINANCIAL SECURITY THROUGH HARD WORK AND HEAVY LOADS**^{vi}, by Laura Buckles expands on trade secrets. This insider’s guide clues in the novice waitress on what to expect on the job. The single signature book is somewhat awkwardly bound into a flat back hard cover for the deluxe edition. The red and white checked tablecloth covering material is a strong visual/tactile introduction to the subject matter. This version also includes two iconic objects from the silver-diner era: the multi-color beaded hairnet and the pansy-printed breast pocket handkerchief. These items signal what could be a nostalgic look at the profession. Instead there is a combination of homey messages and pragmatic tips. Playing off the double meaning of the word “tip” (monetary and/or advisory), Buckles explains the mystery behind customer tipping. With percentages and statistics, she coolly states that it is an emotional rather than mathematical decision. The final message is “Keep up the Mona Lisa smile.” To remind herself of that on the job, the waitress can pull from her own apron pocket the Mona Lisa postcard included in the book. Throughout the book, the various objects take the place of illustrations. Because they are not attributed to a particular character, they somehow are anonymous and personal at the same time. They could belong to anyone, but it would be a very specific anyone- the woman who pulls the guest check out of the pocket with her own nametag on it. Because the reader touches these things and pulls from the pockets, the reader becomes a stand-in for that anonymous waitress. For the moment of reading, the reader wears her shoes. And, as both Baker and Buckles remind us, her feet hurt.

These books by Krasnow, Baker and Buckles call attention to their choices (or lack thereof) as artists and/or workers. There is something out of synch in all three. Although there may be humor, the characters or narrators are not happy. They have jobs, but there is no love of the labor. By dealing with specific people and jobs, the books cue the reader into questioning her own choices. The Art Strike booklet is more insistent, but also expresses disappointment and the need for change. Voters in recent primary elections are interested in “sending a message” that includes those same sentiments. Things are out of synch all over: a papier-mâché apple is not a good education; a good education does not ensure a good job; good photo opportunities do not make good leaders. It has been said that the recession is a wake up call, a signal that things have changed. It is clear that there is more change to come.

ⁱ *The Washington Post*, April 16, 1992, by Mary Jordan and John E. Lang.

ⁱⁱ Art Strike Action Committee (Iowa City), 221 West Benton Street, Iowa City, IA 52246. Also available through Printed Matter.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Picture Dictionary Mail Art Show*, held at the Studio Arts Gallery, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, in October, 1988.

^{iv} Published by the Women’s Studio Workshop, Rosendale NY 1988

^v Published by the Women’s Studio Workshop, 1987

^{vi} Deluxe edition available through Printed Matter, New York, NY