

STRIKE

Interview with Bruce Eves (BE) by Jercy Dee and Venuri Liyanage

~

Word Count: 2700+

Themes: Canadian art history, Canadian publication history

Major Warnings: Brief mentions of disturbing imagery, discussions of sensitive topics

~

The Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) was an art collective that provided an important venue for the production and circulation of experimental art in Toronto from 1975 to 1978. Originally residing at 86 John Street, later 15 Duncan Street, CEAC was the largest art space outside of institutional museums. CEAC provided an important venue for the production and circulation of experimental art in Toronto. Engaging artists, musicians, and activists from across North America, CEAC organized exhibitions in addition to hosting video production facilities, workshops, screening and performance series. CEAC encouraged artist-to-artist communication and provided a platform for Canadian artists to expand their knowledge through tours.

The centre was also home to several publications.

Formerly known as *Art Communication Edition*, *Strike* was one of the highly political art magazines produced by CEAC. Bruce Eves, a member of the CEAC collective, became one of the designers of the magazine. In addition to Bruce, the editorial board of *Strike* consisted of other artists including Suber Corley, Paul McLellan, Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier and Rob Reid, most of whom were graduates from the Ontario College of Arts.

The CEAC publication had nine issues under the name *Art Communication Edition* between the years 1976-1977, and three issues as *Strike* beginning in 1978. The contents in the second issue of *Strike* caused major controversies that led to the withdrawal of funding from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council. The financial cut made future ventures within CEAC impossible, therefore closing the centre soon after.

The following is a compilation of email and in-person interviews with Bruce Eves on matters of provocative publications, politics, exile, and being an artist in Toronto during the 1970s.

Could you give us a glimpse into the “art community” and the environment that fostered *Strike*?

BE: One thing that’s important to stress at the outset is how different the art world was in the mid-to-late 1970s from how it manifests itself today. The difference is crucial to understanding the interpersonal relationships and the interactions with the funding agencies. It’s important to remember that most people who have given their commentary about the period under discussion were never actually there. The opinions expressed by those people are to be understood as third-hand accounts, educated guesses based on historical research, or agenda-driven uninformed opinion.

At that time the art world consisted of only a handful of galleries, mostly secondary-market, in and around Yorkville and a burgeoning artist-run sector consisting of CEAC, A Space, Art Metropole, Trinity Square Video and the art magazines. Everything that is in operation today came later. So the scene was very small, incestuous, and fraught with conflict and jealousies. It needs to be pointed out that all were vying for the same small pot of government funds.

What happened that caused your group to become so politically charged, when the publication transitioned from *Art Communication Edition* to *Strike*?

BE: As a monthly tabloid newspaper, *Art Communication Edition* began publication in September 1976 as the in-house journal chronicling the activities of CEAC at its newly purchased flagship headquarters at 15 Duncan Street. The content initially was simply listings and short descriptions of upcoming events and brief reviews of past events, film and video screens, plus archival lists of publications and films/videos entering the Centre’s library collection.

The drumbeat at the back of all of the issues we were dealing with at the time was the realization that the historical avant-garde was coming to an end. In hindsight this is obvious—at the time, not so much. This was manifested most explosively with Lucy

Lippard's outright denunciation of conceptual art—a movement that she was central in creating and proselytizing—and the ever-increasing knots that its most prominent advocates, Kosuth et al, would twist themselves into to maintain their self-identification as artists while spouting rhetoric about social practice and responsibility.

Personally, I always hated the name *Art Communication Edition*—it's just so bland. I think the name change was intended to be provisional, with the possibility of being rebranded as something else in the future, had there been a future. It's stated very clearly on the front pages of issues 1 and 2, below the new logo, that the publication is "*Art Communication Edition Volume 2.*" It's been said over and over that there was a major break between the last issue of *Art Communication Edition* and the first edition of *Strike*. This is completely incorrect.

Why was the publication's design impacted by the content?

BE: From day one the images always had some bearing on the content and vice versa. But again you cannot view *Strike* as being a different publication with a unique editorial policy from *Art Communication Edition*—one flowed directly from one to the other. The notorious second issue of *Strike* has the murdered bodies in a car, but the ninth issue of *Art Communication Edition* has machine gun-toting soldiers rifling through the trunk of a vehicle. Hermann Nitsch's "Orgien Mysterien Theater" is on another cover of *Strike* but could be interchangeable with the screaming punk rocker Stiv Bators from the Dead Boys or an Amnesty International Torture Scene on different covers of *Art Communication Edition*.

You look at the imagery now and it looks, "Oh my god." No! The scandal issue had a photograph that was clipped out of the newspaper and blown up and put on the cover. This was the same strategy that Warhol used. They were just like clipped out of the newspaper. Warhol's joke that everybody in the future will be famous for 15 minutes—he was talking about car crashes! Those photographs were on the front page of the daily news. That was your 15 minutes of fame. Your death.

You said that a lot of people misunderstand the "scandal." Can you elaborate on that?

BE: The scandal was a complete set-up in that the printer sent it to the *Toronto Sun* before anybody had even seen it. I was the designer. I didn't know—I don't read these things. My job was to make it look pretty. Or in this case, with *Strike*, make it look scary.

I've come to believe that the scandal itself was a fabrication by Peter Worthington, founder of the *Toronto Sun* and editor-in-chief throughout the 1970s. According to his obituary, this was a man virtually at war with the Trudeau prime minister-ship. It makes me wonder whether the scandal surrounding *Strike* was nothing more than a convenient way to attack and embarrass the editor's *bête noir*? As "the arts are a waste of money" and "look what the Liberal government is funding: a bunch of hairy, insane radicals."

That there were no protests from the art community is itself the real scandal. One can only speculate on an art community forming a united front against the idiocy and bullying of the *Toronto Sun*. Would the arts councils have demolished an entire arts sector in the country's largest city by withholding funds from everyone? I doubt it, but cowardice and self-interest prevailed. After the scandal broke the art community split into two selves—the majority fled in fearing for their own funding, leaving a small minority of wolves lusting and envious for the goodies CEAC had been able to acquire. After the fall, there was what appeared to have been a concerted effort, I and others would go so far as to say a coordinated concerted effort, to write CEAC out of history. It was an art magazine! This is the one thing that everyone sort of blips over like, "Oh, *Strike*, *Strike*, *Strike*!" *Strike* was an art magazine.

If *The Sun* had never gotten a hold of any of your content, do you really think you could have just continued with *Strike*?

BE: I think it would have continued on, yes. What's interesting is that when the shit really hit the fan, and the arts councils freaked out, and the "art community" ran for cover because everyone was afraid of their own grants, it collapsed. There was no more money. After the money was gone I had to leave because I had no money. I needed a job.

It would be interesting to know how it would've evolved after, if that whole thing hadn't happened. I'm of the feeling that CEAC itself wouldn't have made it into the 80s with the Thatcher-Reagan-Mulroney sort of neo-liberal, conservative governments. The art world shifted away from conceptual art, performance art, all the sort of more provocative stuff

into commercial, decorative crap. The thing to remember about CEAC is that we didn't have exhibitions. It was talking, lots and lots of talking. Performances, very ad hoc stuff. If someone showed up and had an idea to do a performance: "Sure, when do you wanna do it?" Now, it's all done by committee and it's months away. No, you know: "Yeah, come on, do it tomorrow afternoon."

We found when we were looking up *Strike*, or just CEAC in general, it was just really hard to find information.

BE: There is Dot Tuer, who is as far as I'm concerned, wrote the best commentary about CEAC so far, for *C Magazine*. After it was published she would encounter people and it was, "How dare you?" There was this conscious effort by a group of people to bury it. "How dare you put this out, how dare you talk about this? This is not part of our history." This group of artists, curators, writers were trying to bury it. Philip Monk's book, *Is Toronto Burning?*, is written out of laziness. He had an agenda, and his agenda was that *General Idea*, and that circle was the center of the universe. Well, sorry, it wasn't. I think what they were doing was old-fashioned. Sort of 1960s, Warhol, campy stuff 10 years too late. Philip works at York and he didn't even bother to go and do the research in the archive. He was basing a lot of what he was writing on hearsay and it came from someone who was not there. So he was getting a lot of this information second, or third-hand. Somebody has to write the story properly. Somebody with no agenda and no vested interest.

What did you want to provoke people about? What were the kinds of things that *Strike*, or you yourself, wanted to push people's buttons about?

BE: I don't think we were doing anything that was necessarily, consciously provocative. What we were doing what everyone else was doing. That was the current. The objective was to push buttons. People need to be provoked. I'm not interested in this passive audience of cows. That's why we go to the theatre, or the movies, where there's actually no interaction. The point was to get people talking, and to get people thinking about these kind of issues. The whole point of doing performance art was because it was a total rejection of past art history. Painting and sculpture were just a thing of the past, they no longer had interest. The irony, of course, is that everything that I'm doing now would

never be shown at CEAC because it's more, quote, "traditional." It's a lot of photo-based stuff, it's stuff hanging on the walls. Nothing hung on the walls at CEAC.

You seem in your own practice to have moved away from the radicalism of *Strike*, though your work with the gay archive is essentially political.

BE: Yes, the gay archive. Well, it's in the States. With the archive, here was an example where art just doesn't matter anymore because when all your friends and colleagues are dropping dead all around you, maybe you should be doing something other than "making pictures about this horrible time." So we started the gay archive to just gather all this information, gather people's stories.

Do you think that relates to what you did at *Strike*, gathering these different stories?

BE: I think it's an extension of it. I was in this period where I got to this stopping point, "Where do I go from here?" Conceptual art is complete collapse, the entire art world has completely rationally gone backwards— which I refused to do—and doing the archive was a kind of way of extending what was happening with *Strike* and CEAC and *Art Communications* and the performance art stuff, extending it in a different direction. Because the origins of the CEAC was in the gay liberation movement, and when I came on the scene in '75/'76, I was doing all this stuff about the gay sensibility and it was like, "Okay, here that's your stick, you take that, you take over the gay liberation stuff."

So, how would you define an artist, either back then or even now?

BE: It's someone who is involved with aesthetics, history. I define it very narrowly: within art history, within visual art. That is wide ranging, but it's narrow. It's performance artist; it's not dealing with theatre, it's dealing with art history. It comes from a completely different trajectory. I am not sure artists learn art history anymore. This happened, then this happened, and this happened. I've met too many younger people that seem just not to know very much. I think that's a problem. If you don't know the rules, how can you break them? It's like somebody who writes Broadway musicals never having heard of Cole Porter before. Or a playwright never having heard of Shakespeare. There is a sort of basic knowledge that you have to have. Even the kind of things that are described as

“performance art” now are just clownish. Just junk. It’s a joke. I’m not interested in entertaining that one percent. It seems to be that everyone wants to be the next Jeff Koons—sorry, no.

What do you describe as successful performance art today?

BE: Actually, what I would consider successful performance art is that people would start walking out. It’s like, “How dare you?” Why is it so difficult for people to stick their neck out? That’s what the neck is there for, to stick out, as far as I’m concerned.

Do you think there’s a creative publication like *Strike* now?

BE: No, no. Because I don’t think there’s the knowledge. Like I said at the beginning, when we were working in the late 70s there were at least half a dozen monthly publications outside of the glossies. If it existed at all, it would be online. I mean, there are online art publications but who reads them? I don’t. I really don’t. They are also very conservative and they are boring. But again, *Strike* wasn’t a standalone publication, it was part of an organization. So maybe the question should be turned around, opposite: “Is there an art organization that would be able to put out something like *Strike* today?” No, absolutely not!

Why do you think that?

BE: Because art organizations are only interested in cozying up to the one percent. When was the last time you saw a really provocative exhibition at the AGO, or at The Power Plant? I haven’t been to the AGO in, I don’t know how long. I’m not interested in all that selfie stuff with what’s her name.¹ I hate that stuff, I just hate it. It’s like, “Oh God! This is art for stupid people.”

Why do you want to provoke people?

BE: It’s not about taking any kind of action. It’s about causing people to think. To wake people up. And, I’m sorry, art is not a half-hour television sitcom. It’s not about being nice to the one percent. It’s to provoke people. If that means people walking away being insulted, or they are being offended, well, tough shit! If you are offended, who cares?

It's sort of a delicate balance, because if you are intentionally setting out to be really offensive, you end up being a jerk. I don't want to be a jerk. I don't want to be put in a position where I am afraid to do something because if I do this maybe someone is going to get upset. It's not me, I'm trying to be truthful and honest. And if you are offended by what I see as truthfulness and honesty, that's your problem! It's not mine. I don't know, nowadays everyone is so thin-skinned.

Footnotes

¹ Referring to Yayoi Kusama's AGO exhibit at the time, *Infinity Mirrors* (2018).

Edited (2021/03): Minor discrepancies in format and spelling between this document and the printed publication from 2018 were done to correct mistakes missed before print.