

The Case against Art

John Zerzan

Art is always about “something hidden.” But does it help us connect with that hidden something? I think it moves us away from it.

During the first million or so years as reflective beings, humans seem to have created no art. As Jameson put it, art had no place in that “unfallen social reality” because there was no need for it. Though tools were fashioned with an astonishing economy of effort and perfection of form, the old cliché about the aesthetic impulse as one of the irreducible components of the human mind is invalid.

The oldest enduring works of art are hand-prints, produced by pressure or blown pigment—a dramatic token of direct impress on nature. Later, in the Upper Paleolithic era, about 30,000 years ago commenced the rather sudden appearance of cave art discovered at places like Altamira and Lascaux. Those images of animals possess an often breathtaking vibrancy and naturalism, though sculpture of that period, such as the widely-found “venus” statuettes of women, was quite stylized.

Perhaps this stylization indicates that domestication of people was to precede domestication of nature. Significantly, the “sympathetic magic” or hunter theory of earliest art (that cave paintings, for example, were created as a form of utilitarian control over nature), is now waning in light of evidence that nature was bountiful rather than threatening.

Something Precious Slipping Away

The veritable explosion of art at this early time bespeaks an anxiety not felt before: in Worringer’s words, “creation in order to subdue the torment of perception.” Here is the appearance of the symbolic, as a moment of discontent. It was a social anxiety; people felt something precious slipping away. The rapid development of ritual or ceremony parallels the birth of art, and we are reminded of the earliest ritual re-enactments of the moment of “the beginning,” the primordial paradise of the timeless present. Pictorial representation roused the belief in controlling loss, the belief in coercion itself.

And we see the earliest evidence of symbolic division, as with the half human, half beast stone faces at El Juyo. The world is divided into opposing forces, by which binary distinction begins the contrast of culture and nature and a productionist, hierarchical society is perhaps already prefigured.

The perceptual order itself, as a unity, started to break down in the face of an increasingly complex social order. A hierarchy of senses, with the visual steadily more separate from the others and seeking its completion in artificial images such as cave paintings, moved to replace the full simultaneity of sensual gratification. Levi-Strauss discovered, to his amazement, a tribal people that had been able to see Venus in daytime; but not only were our faculties once so very acute, they were also not ordered and separate. Part of training sight to appreciate the objects of culture was the accompanying repression of immediacy in an intellectual sense: reality was removed in favor of merely aesthetic experience. Art anesthetizes the sense organs and removes the natural world from their purview. This reproduces culture, which can never compensate for the disability.

Not surprisingly, the first signs of a departure from the egalitarian principles that characterized hunter-gatherer life begin to show up at this point. The shamanistic origin of visual art and music has been often remarked upon, the point being here that the artist-shaman was the first specialist. It seems likely that the ideas of surplus and commodity appeared with the shaman, whose orchestration of symbolic activity portended further alienation and stratification.

Art, like language, is a system of symbolic exchange that introduces exchange itself. It is also a necessary device for holding together a community based on the first symptoms of unequal life. Tolstoy's statement that "art is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feeling," elucidates art's contribution to social cohesion at the dawn of culture. Socializing ritual required art; art works originated in the service of ritual; the ritual production of art and the artistic production of ritual are the same. "Music," wrote Seu-ma-tsen, "is what unifies."

As the need for solidarity accelerated, so did the need for ceremony; art also played a role in its mnemonic function. Art, with myth closely following, served as the semblance of real memory. In the recesses of the caves, earliest indoctrination proceeded via the paintings and other symbols, intended to inscribe rules in depersonalized, collective memory. Nietzsche saw the training of memory, especially the memory of obligations, as the beginning of civilized morality. Once the symbolic process of art developed, it dominated memory as well as perception, putting its stamp on all mental functions. Cultural memory meant that one person's action could be compared with those of another, including portrayed ancestors, and future behavior anticipated and controlled. Memories become externalized, akin to property but not even the property of the subject.

Individual Separated from Nature

Art turns the subject into object, into symbol. The shaman's role was to objectify reality; this happened to outer nature and to subjectivity alike because alienated life demanded it. Art provided the medium of conceptual transformation by which the individual was separated socially from nature and dominated at the deepest level. Art's ability to symbolize and direct human emotion accomplished both ends. What we were led to accept as necessity, in order to keep ourselves oriented in nature and society, was at base the invention of the symbolic world, the Fall of Man.

The world must be mediated by art (and human communication by language, and being by time) due to division of labor, as seen in the nature of ritual. The real object, its particularity, does not appear in ritual; instead, an abstract one is used, so that the terms of ceremonial expression are open to substitution. The conventions needed in division of labor, with its standardization and loss of the unique, are those of ritual, of symbolization. The process is at base identical, based on equivalence. Production of goods, as the hunter-gatherer mode is gradually liquidated in favor of agriculture (historical production) and religion (full symbolic production), is also ritual production.

The agent, again, is the shaman-artist, en route to priesthood, leader by reason of mastering his own immediate desires via the symbol. All that is spontaneous, organic and instinctive is to be neutered by art and myth.

Recently the painter Eric Fischl presented at the Whitney Museum a couple in the act of sexual intercourse. A video camera recorded their actions and projected them on a TV monitor before the two. The man's eyes were riveted to the image on the screen which was clearly more exciting than the act itself. The evocative cave pictures, volatile in the dramatic, lamp-lit depths, began the transfer exemplified in Fischl's tableau, in which even the most primal acts can become secondary to their representation. Conditioned self-distancing from real existence has been a goal of art from the beginning. Similarly, the category of audience, of supervised consumption, is nothing new, as art has striven to make life itself an object of contemplation.

As the Paleolithic Age gave way to the Neolithic arrival of agriculture and civilization—production, private property, written language, government and religion—culture could be seen more fully as spiritual decline via division of labor, though global specialization and a mechanistic technology did not prevail until the late Iron Age.

Creating the Symbolic Universe

The vivid representation of late hunter-gatherer art was replaced by a formalistic, geometrical style, reducing pictures of animals and humans to symbolic shapes. This narrow stylization reveals the artist shutting himself off from the wealth of empirical reality and creating the symbolic universe. The aridity of linear precision is one of the hallmarks of this turning point, calling to mind the Yoruba, who associate line with civilization: "This country has become civilized," literally means, in Yoruba, "this earth has lines upon its face." The inflexible forms of truly alienated society are everywhere apparent; Gordon Childe, for example, referring to this spirit, points out that the pots of a Neolithic village are all alike. Warfare in the form of combat scenes makes its first appearance in art at this time also.

The work of art was in no sense autonomous at this time; it served society in a direct sense, an instrument of the needs of the new collectivity. There had been no worship-cults during the Paleolithic, but now religion held sway, and it is worth remembering that for thousands of years art's function will be to depict the gods. Meanwhile, what Gluck stressed about African tribal architecture was true in all other cultures as well: sacred buildings came to life on the model of those of the secular ruler. And even though the first signed works do not show up before the late Greek period, it is appropriate to speak here of art's realization, by defining some of its general features.

Art not only creates the symbols of and for a society, it is a basic part of the symbolic matrix of estranged social life. Oscar Wilde said that art does not imitate life, but vice versa; which is to say that life follows symbolism, not forgetting that it is (deformed) life that produces symbolism. Every art form, according to T. S. Eliot, is "an attack upon the inarticulate." Upon the unsymbolized, he should have said.

Both painter and poet have always wanted to reach the silence behind and within art and language, leaving the question of whether the individual, in adopting these modes of expression didn't settle for far too little. Though Bergson tried to approach the goal of thought without symbols, such a breakthrough seems impossible outside our active undoing of all the layers of alienation. In the extremity of revolutionary situations, immediate communication has bloomed, if briefly.

Art is the Creation of Substitutes

The primary function of art is to objectify feeling, by which one's own motivations and identity are transformed into symbol and metaphor. All art, as symbolization, is rooted in the creation of substitutes, surrogates for something else; by its very nature therefore, it is a falsification. Under the guise of "enriching the quality of human experience," we accept vicarious, symbolic descriptions of how we should feel, trained to need such public images of sentiment that ritual art and myth provide for our psychic security.

Life in civilization is lived almost wholly in a medium of symbols. Not only scientific or technological activity consists largely of symbolic processing. The laws of aesthetic form are canons of symbolization, often expressed quite unspiritually. It is widely averred, for example, that a limited number of mathematical figures account for the efficacy of art. There is Cezanne's famous dictum to "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere and the cone," and Kandinsky's judgment that "the impact of the acute angle of a triangle on a circle produces an effect no less powerful than the finger of God touching the finger of Adam in Michelangelo." The sense of a symbol, as Charles Peirce concluded, is its translation into another symbol, thus an endless reproduction, with the real always displaced.

Though art is not fundamentally concerned with beauty, its inability to rival nature sensuously has evoked many unfavorable comparisons. "Moonlight is sculpture," wrote Hawthorne; Shelly praised the "unpremeditated art" of the skylark; Verlaine pronounced the sea more beautiful than all the cathedrals. And so on, with sunsets, snowflakes, flowers, etc., beyond the symbolic products of art. Jean Arp, in fact, termed "the most perfect picture" nothing more than "a warty, threadbare approximation, a dry porridge."

Why then would one respond positively to art? As compensation and palliative, because our relationship to nature and life is so deficient and disallows an authentic one. As Motherlant put it, "One gives to one's art what one has not been capable of giving to one's existence." It is true for artist and audience alike; art, like religion, arises from unsatisfied desire.

Art should be considered a religious activity and category also in the sense of Nietzsche's aphorism, "We have art in order not to perish of Truth." Its consolation explains the widespread preference for metaphor over a direct relationship to the genuine article. If pleasure were somehow released from every restraint, the result would be the antithesis of art. In dominated life freedom does not exist outside art, however, and so even a tiny, deformed fraction of the riches of being is welcomed. "I create in order not to cry," revealed Klee.

Worked as Generators of Guilt and Oppression

This separate realm of contrived life is both impotent and in complicity with the actual nightmare that prevails. In its institutionalized separation it corresponds to religion and ideology in general, where its elements are not, and cannot be, actualized; the work of art is a selection of possibilities unrealized except in symbolic terms. Arising from the sense of loss referred to above, it conforms to religion not only by reason of its confinement to an ideal sphere and its absence of any dissenting consequences, but it can hence be no more than thoroughly neutralized critique at best.

Frequently compared to play, art and culture—like religion—have more often worked as generators of guilt and oppression. Perhaps the ludic function of art, as well as its common claim to transcendence, should be estimated as one might reassess the meaning of Versailles: by contemplating the misery of the workers who perished draining its marshes.

Clive Bell pointed to the intention of art to transport us from the plane of daily struggle "to a world of aesthetic exaltation," paralleling the aim of religion. Malraux offered another tribute to the conservative office of art when he wrote that, without art works civilization would crumble "within fifty years" ...becoming "enslaved to instincts and to elementary dreams."

Hegel determined that art and religion also have "this in common, namely, having entirely universal matters as content." This feature of generality, of meaning without concrete reference, serves to introduce the notion that ambiguity is a distinctive sign of art.

Usually depicted positively, as a revelation of truth free of the contingencies of time and place, the impossibility of such a formulation only illuminates another moment of falseness about art. Kierkegaard found the defining trait of the aesthetic outlook to be its hospitable reconciliation of all points of view and its evasion of choice. This can be seen in the perpetual compromise that at once valorizes art only to repudiate its intent and content with, "Well, after all, it is only art."

Tie Culture Industry

Today culture is commodity and art perhaps the star commodity. The situation is understood inadequately as the product of a centralized culture industry, à la Horkheimer and Adorno. We witness, rather, a mass diffusion of culture dependent on participation for its strength, not forgetting that the critique must be of culture itself, not of its alleged control.

Daily life has become anesthetized by a saturation of images and music, largely through the electronic media, the representation of representation. Image and sound, in their ever-presence, have become a void, ever more absent of meaning for the individual. Meanwhile, the distance between artist and spectator has diminished, a narrowing that only highlights the absolute distance between aesthetic experience and what is real. This perfectly duplicates the spectacle at large: separate and manipulating, perpetual aesthetic experience and a demonstration of political power.

Reacting against the increasing mechanization of life, avant-garde movements have not, however, resisted the spectacular nature of art any more than orthodox tendencies have. In fact, one could argue that Aestheticism, or "art for art's sake," is more radical than an attempt to engage alienation with its own devices. This late 19th century art pour l'art development was a self-reflective rejection of the world, as opposed to the avant-garde effort to somehow organize life around art. A valid moment of doubt lies behind Aestheticism, the realization that division

of labor has diminished experience and turned art into just another specialization: art shed its illusory ambitions and became its own content.

The avant-garde has generally staked out wider claims, projecting a leading role denied it by modern capitalism. It is best understood as a social institution peculiar to technological society that so strongly prizes novelty; it is predicated on the progressivist notion that reality must be constantly updated. But avant-garde culture cannot compete with the modern world's capacity to shock and transgress (and not just symbolically). Its demise is another datum that the myth of progress is itself bankrupt.

Dada was one of the last two major avant-garde movements, its negative image greatly enhanced by the sense of general historical collapse radiated by World War I. Its partisans claimed, at times, to be against all "isms," including the idea of art. But painting cannot negate painting, nor can sculpture invalidate sculpture, keeping in mind that all symbolic culture is the co-opting of perception, expression and communication. In fact, Dada was a quest for new artistic modes, its attack on the rigidities and irrelevancies of bourgeois art a factor in the advance of art. Hans Richter's memoirs referred to "the regeneration of visual art that Dada had begun." If World War I almost killed art, the Dadaists reformed it.

Surrealism is the last school to assert the political mission of art. Before trailing off into Trotskyism and/or art-world fame, the Surrealists upheld chance and the primitive as ways to unlock "the Marvelous" which society imprisons in the unconscious. The false judgment that would have re-introduced art into everyday life and thereby transfigured it certainly misunderstood the relationship of art to repressive society. The real barrier is not between art and social reality, which are one, but between desire and the existing world. The Surrealists' aim of inventing a new symbolism and mythology upheld those categories and mistrusted unmediated sensuality. Concerning the latter, Breton held that "enjoyment is a science; the exercise of the senses demands a personal initiation and therefore you need art."

The Nothingness of Modern Art

Modernist abstraction resumed the trend begun by Aestheticism, in that it expressed the conviction that only by a drastic restriction of its field of vision could art survive. With the least stain of embellishment possible in a formal language, art became increasingly self-referential, in its search for a "purity" that was hostile to narrative. Guaranteed not to represent anything, modern painting is consciously nothing more than a flat surface with paint on it.

But the strategy of trying to empty art of symbolic value, the insistence on the work of art as an object in its own right in a world of objects, proved a virtually self-annihilating method. This "radical physicality," based on aversion to authority though it was, never amounted to more, in its objectness, than simple commodity status. The sterile grids of Mondrian and the repeated all-black squares of Reinhardt echo this acquiescence no less than hideous 20th century architecture in general. Modernish self-liquidation was parodied by Rauschenberg's 1953 Erased Drawing, exhibited after his month-long erasure of a deKooning drawing. The very concept of art, Duchamp's showing of a urinal in a 1917 exhibition notwithstanding, became an open question in the '50s and has grown steadily undefinable since.

Pop Art demonstrated that the boundaries between art and mass media (e.g. ads and comics) are dissolving. Its perfunctory and mass-produced look is that of the whole society and the detached, blank quality of a Warhol and his products sum it up. Banal, morally weightless, depersonalized images, cynically manipulated by a fashion-conscious marketing stratagem: the nothingness of modern art and its world revealed.

The proliferation of art styles and approaches in the '60s—conceptual, minimalist, performance, etc.—and the accelerated obsolescence of most art brought the "postmodern" era, a displacement of the formal "purism" of modernism by an eclectic mix from past stylistic achievements. This is basically a tired, spiritless recycling of used-up fragments, announcing that the development of art is at an end. Against the global devaluing of the symbolic, moreover, it is incapable of generating new symbols and scarcely even makes an effort to do so.

Occasional critics, like Thomas Lawson, bemoan art's current inability "to stimulate the growth of a really troubling doubt," little noticing that a quite noticeable movement of doubt threatens to throw over art itself. Such

“critics” cannot grasp that art must remain alienation and as such must be superseded, that art is disappearing because the immemorial separation between nature and art is a death sentence for the world that must be voided.
*

The End of Art?

Since Piero Manzoni canned his own feces and sold them in a gallery and Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm, and crucified to a Volkswagen, we see in art ever more fitting parables of its end, such as the self-portraits drawn by Anastasi—with his eyes closed. “Serious” music is long dead and popular music deteriorates; poetry nears collapse and retreats from view; drama, which moved from the Absurd to Silence, is dying; and the novel is eclipsed by non-fiction as the only way to write seriously.

In a jaded, enervated age, when, it seems, to speak is to say less, art is certainly less. Baudelaire was obliged to claim a poet’s dignity in a society which had no more dignity to hand out. A century and more later how inescapable is the truth of that condition and how much more threadbare the consolation or station of “timeless” art.

Adorno began his last book thusly: “Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist.” But this Aesthetic Theory affirms art, just as Marcuse’s last work did, testifying to despair and to the difficulty of assailing the hermetically sealed ideology of culture. And although other “radicals,” such as Habermas, counsel that the desire to abolish symbolic mediation is irrational, it is becoming clearer that when we really experiment with our hearts and hands the sphere of art is shown to be pitiable. In the transfiguration we must enact, the symbolic will be left behind and art refused in favor of the real. Play, creativity, self-expression and authentic experience will recommence at that moment.

* Deconstruction, for its part, announced the project of decoding literature and indeed the “texts,” or systems of signification, throughout all culture. But this attempt to reveal supposedly hidden ideology is stymied by its refusal to consider origins or historical causation, an aversion it inherited from structuralism/post-structuralism. Derrida, Deconstruction’s seminal figure, deals with language as a solipsism, consigned to self-interpretation; he engages not in critical activity but in writing about writing. Rather than a de-constructing of impacted reality, this approach is merely a self-contained academicism, in which Literature, like modern painting before it, never departs from concern with its own surface.

fifth Estate

John Zerzan
The Case against Art

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/324-fall-1986/the-case-against-art>
Fifth Estate #324, Fall, 1986

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)