

A “Culture-in-Action”

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FE note: This is one of three responses to John Zerzan’s “The Case Against Art,” in FE #324, Fall 1986. The other two articles are: “Art, Life & Death” by Ratticus and “Journal Notes on Art” by George Bradford.

“Culture is dead. Create!”

—Paris graffito, 1968

“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

—Emma Goldman

If, as Theodor Adorno wrote in a passage cited by John Zerzan in his provocative “case” against art, “Everything about art has become problematic,” we should beware of unitary critiques which suppress the multiplicity of meanings in what is considered to be aesthetic activity. Zerzan heeds no such caution, starting from the hypothesis that art does not connect us “with that hidden something” which it is purportedly about, but “moves us away from it.” Against the falsification which is art, he posits the “real”: “Conditioned self-distancing from real existence has been a goal of art from the beginning,” he writes. “Art anesthetizes the sense organs and removes the natural world from their purview.”

Zerzan’s central target is, however, the symbolic universe itself. Creating a dubious paleontology, he argues, as he has in previous essays on time, language and number, that the emergence of symbolic activity itself brought about the end of a previous unalienated life, and ushered in domination and separation from nature. Arguing that humanity had no art, indeed, no symbolization for its first million years “as reflective beings,” he asserts, “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.”

But what if this “old cliché” is true? Symbolization, and with it, aesthetic awareness, must have existed long before the appearance of the figurines and paintings that Zerzan associates with the origins of art. After all, symbolic activity occurs even among other species, for example, play and symbolic communication between wolves, or the mimicry that occurs throughout nature, such as the mother bird that feigns injury to draw predators away from her young, or the playful imitation that occurs among primates.

Furthermore, the beauty and perfection of arrowheads, harpoon points and the like can be no accident, but the result of an aesthetic sensibility, a recognition, in fact, of forms that already exist in nature; the sublime lines in the simple tools and carvings of the earliest human beings flow from a balance of form in nature itself, the mating plumage of birds and the perfection of flowers and crystals. Not only must the origin of art be expanded to include the entirety of human-made objects, but beyond that to the very recognition of resemblances and to the process of selection which grasps at what is marvelous.

Hence Andrei Leroi-Gourhan begins his discussion of the origins of art (in an elegant essay, “The Beginnings of Art,” in the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Prehistoric and Ancient Art*) with the eoliths—unusual stones gathered by prehistoric people, including nodules of rough flint not shaped by people but bearing strange resemblances to animals.

Such objects go back into the lower paleolithic period, long before the appearance of carved bones and statuettes. Leroi-Gourhan notes in passing the parallel tendency among latter day primitives to collect odd shaped stones, but in fact this trait has been observed even in other primates such as apes, who have been known to collect stones and carry them great distances.

Fragments of ochre coloring as well as objects arranged symmetrically have also been found in anthropoidal settlements back beyond *Homo sapiens*. "It is not unreasonable," Leroi-Gourhan surmises, "to attribute some aesthetic activity to some of these anthropians, who exhibited an enormous number of nuances in their mental development." But, he adds, we must remember that "art in its primitive forms was indivisible from the total activity of the anthropian."

So it may be possible to distinguish what occurred among prehistoric peoples (and paleolithic peoples of historical memory) as something other than "art," that specialized category that occurs in hierarchic civilization. The Balinese say, for example, that they have no art. Yet Artaud wrote of the Balinese, "who have a repertoire of gestures and mimetic devices for every circumstance of life," that they created a "pure theater," "carved directly from matter, from life, from reality"—a "mental alchemy" that brings about a "magical identification." This is an activity embedded in life, not an alienated entertainment, which raises a question that Zerzan's thesis precludes: what of such an activity distinct from what art and culture have become in capitalist civilization, what of a poetry made by all, a participation in nature rather than a separation from it?

"Between nature and man," wrote the aesthetician Henri Focillon, "form intervenes." And English sculptor Henry Moore described his own gathering of eoliths in 1937: "I have always paid great attention to natural forms, such as bones, shells, and pebbles, etc. Sometimes, for several years running, I have been to the same part of the sea-shore—but each year a new shape of pebble has caught my eye, which the year before, although it was there in hundreds, I never saw. Out of the millions of pebbles passed in walking along the shore, I choose out to see with excitement only those which fit in with my existing form-interest at the time ..." The paleolithic collector and the modern sculptor both engage in recognition and selection, before making any transformations in the materials. The form already exists in the stone, and is there discovered.

Siegfried Giedion, describing a bison on the cave wall at Altamira, writes in *The Eternal Present: The Origins of Art*, "The entire posture of this animal has been determined by the configurations of the rocks ... the addition of some tawny color and a few engraved lines have simply strengthened the form that was already there." And later, he adds, "When the world was regarded as an inseparable whole, rocks were looked upon with different eyes than ours. The animals that primeval man engraved or painted were, for him, already living in the rock. They were there: he had only to complete them."

And what, one might ask, were these people doing in the caverns in the first place? Hans Peter Duerr, in his inspiring work *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Civilization and Wilderness*, gives an indication. "Some of the paleolithic caves," he writes, "suggest the thesis that the cult caves of the Ice Age were uteri of the earth goddess. The initiate was conducted into a cave so that he would 'die' and then be born again to a new life ... cults of this nature can be traced through the millennia almost to the present." Knowledge of death, and of life transformations, is intimately bound up with the practices that we have labeled art. Such recognition does imply a kind of separation, but also the existence of a reality which is layered or multifaceted.

A recognition of resemblance, of change, of analogy, must have existed long before the production of what has become art. And the caves where the initiations occurred must have been analogous to our inner reality—wilderness not simply "out there," but within us. The aesthetic production, then, serves as a "communicating vessel," to use a surrealist term, between different levels of reality. At times it reflects something about material reality itself—Michelangelo's notion of *intelletto*, for example, by which the sculptor liberated a form from the rock that was already present in it. But the plastic imagination comes from within as well. As Jean Arp reasoned, "A picture or a sculpture without any object for model is just as concrete and sensual as a leaf or a stone." "Art is a fruit that grows in man," he wrote, referring to a discussion with painter Piet Mondrian in which the latter "distinguished between art and nature, saying that art is artificial and nature natural ... I believe that nature is not in opposition to art. Art is of natural origin ..."

Of course, an abyss separates this activity of primitive peoples from that industry which art has become. Because Zerzan fails to see what is real about myth, he also misses the genuinely radical current in modern aesthetic

movements, their tendency to go beyond art and rediscover that primal balance which weaves plastic expression, technics, myth, healing, music, dance, poetry and memory into a living, liberatory culture. He dispenses with dada and surrealism in two neat paragraphs, but it was the visionary radicals in these two movements who perhaps went furthest in recognizing the reemergence of the primitive vision. Artaud, for example, saw the power of analogy in his comment that “between an illness and a passion, between a passion and an earthquake, we can establish resemblances and strange harmonies of sound.” He pointed, furthermore, to primitive culture as a way out of the malaise of civilization and the alienation of art as a category within capital, raising the idea of “culture-in-action, of culture growing within us like a new organ, a sort of second breath.”

Compare this with the primitive notion of culture as breath, and dance as the “‘breath of life’ made visible,” described by Jamake Highwater in his book *The Primal Mind*. “The body is an organ of expression,” writes Highwater. “The body is the organism in which motion makes visible the sacred forms of life itself.” Dancing, which by the way has also been observed in a fashion among other primates (and what is one to call the mating rituals and play among animals if not a dance?), occurs among all primitive peoples, and must have gone on among people in the earliest times.

With civilization comes the fragmentation of this organic whole into alienated spheres of aesthetic activity, medicine, history and religion. In its turn, capital reduces all to commodities, instruments first of class rule and finally of a technological megamachine with its pseudo-participation and integration. Art becomes an instrument of repression as reality becomes an aestheticized, mediatized hallucination. To see all symbolization as alienation mystifies the real causes of alienation and suggests that no human society has ever experienced a free and unalienated life. And it ignores the ever-present, latent potential of even alienated artistic expression, in dance, poetry, and so on, to challenge this alienated life and to open up avenues for realizing one which is authentic.

The entire trajectory of dada and surrealism, in particular, reflects a desire to smash through alienated civilization and renew our primitive, direct relation with nature. “We have forgotten how to look at nature, how to feel its wholeness,” wrote Artaud in *The Theater and Its Double*. For him, to “return to nature” was to “rediscover life.” And Arp wrote of his own desire “to find another order, another value for man in nature. He was no longer to be the measure of all things, no longer to reduce everything to his own measure, but on the contrary, all things and man were to be like nature, without measure.”

This rebellion was fundamentally a refusal of what reality had become in the Cartesian, scientific-rationalist universe of modern capitalism. As Picasso wrote, “Reality is more than the thing itself. I always look for its super-reality. Reality lies in how you see things. A green parrot is also a green salad and a green parrot. He who makes it only a parrot diminishes its reality.” When Picasso was congratulated on the extraordinary, archetypal character of a bull’s head he fashioned from a bicycle seat and handlebars, he replied, “That’s not enough. It should be possible to take a piece of wood and find that it’s a bird.” A vision he shared with primitives, for whom, in Highwater’s words, “images are a means of celebrating mystery and not a manner of explaining it.” The surrealists declared little interest in art; for them poetry was not merely a “means of expression” but an activity of the spirit, the poetic image not a copy but an encounter, thus emblematic of what all creative activity can and must be.

The failure of the surrealists is the failure of an epoch: the failure of the proletarian rebellions to overthrow capitalism and to create a human paradise on earth, and the failure of poets and visionaries to forge a new language which could undermine the conditioning and the conditions of modern capital. But they played an important preparatory role in the reemergent primitive vision, the imagination’s true revenge. And despite personal capitulations, domestication by the culture industry and reification by its contemporary epigones, there remains in surrealism a radical, dangerous current which cannot be assimilated. *

Zerzan writes, “The real barrier is not between art and social reality, which are one, but between desire and the existing world.” But an attack on culture is itself an act of culture, that “true culture,” in Artaud’s words, which is “a refined means of understanding and exercising life.” “If I am a poet or an actor,” he writes elsewhere, “it is not in order to write or recite poems but in order to live them.” Even the radical “proverbs” from the walls of rebel Paris in 1968, such as “I rejoice in the paving stones,” are not the suppression of poetry but its subversion and renewal; they have their resonance in poetry elsewhere, as in Arp’s poem: “The stones are filled with tenderness ... the stones are tormented like flesh ...”

Consider the correspondence between Zerzan's statement and that of André Breton: "The poet of the future will surmount the depressing notion of the inseparable divorce of action and dream." Neither the revolutionary upheavals nor the visionary poets and artists achieved this renewal; their failure left the forces of domination in an even more powerful, entrenched position. Their discoveries, like weapons left behind on a battlefield during a retreat, are now used against us. To challenge the alienated category of art; to create a culture-in-action embedded in nature; to renew language, poetry, a Ghost Dance to unleash forces held at bay since the origins of hierarchic civilization—all of this remains for us to do. The authentic life which recommences will have moved beyond art—but it nevertheless will be danced as the pulsing of our blood communicates with the planets; it will sing like Shelley's Aeolian harp as the breath-of-life passes over it; it will be daubed in paint on our dwellings, our tools, our bodies; it will be plucked on strings and pounded on drums and blown on every imaginable kind of horn. The repressive discourse of science, technology and business will give way to techniques of the sacred, experiments in seeing. Language will rediscover its poetic source, "so that speaking," as Paul Eluard wrote,

May be generous

As kissing

To merge bather and river

Crystal and dancer of the storm ...

If capital has enslaved poetic passion and love in its prisonhouse of industrial commodity culture; if it has learned to engage in its own aesthetic operations to assert its present hegemony; if it has reduced the creative impulse to art, a professional category within an economic universe; it is because that impulse is ambiguous, an alternating current. But it takes place on contested ground: that of the imagination, desire, dream, language. A culture-in-action, a visionary language wedded to nature, can also appear, as the surrealists proposed, as a declaration of insurrection against history. Poetry, like love, like an ecstatic dance, can bring down an empire, exploding its rigid conditioning, its logic, its repressive reality. Wilderness continues to lie within us. It remains for us to free it, through our bodies, which are the world, which are a culture, a dance, a poetry: desire manifest.

* The important role of surrealism in the reemergence of a primitive vision was the subject of a talk I gave last spring for the Coffee-House Talks series at Detroit's Bagley Café. I hope to write it as an article for a future FE. I would also like to disavow the male-centered use of language in the sources I quoted—a large deficiency, by the way, of the surrealist movement, despite the participation in it of many brilliant women.

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