

Art, Life & Death

Ratticus

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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: "A 'Culture-in-Action'" by George Bradford and "Journal Notes on Art" by George Bradford.

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John Zerzan's "Case Against Art" is an opus to the reality principle, Rationalist reaction, a puritanical attempt to reduce the multiverse into a limpid, linear, static version of nature and consciousness. Except for that, it is well-written and a masterly example of philosophical name-dropping.

What is this "reality" that is interdicted by art? The author is so adept at stigmatizing everything that gets in its way cave paintings, music, ceremony, ritual, symbols, images. He refers to the sea, sunflakes, flowers, so-called empirical reality, forgetting that these "objects" are actually electromagnetic impressions on the retina forming image patterns on the brain, they are as "unreal" as any symbol or image created by people. The difference being that people, in creating their own symbols or images, or in choosing which objects to reproduce at least have the autonomy that mere spectators of empirical reality lack.

Zerzan's puritanical reality, devoid of dreams, visions, musings, sexual fantasies, etc., remind one of a tourist plummeting in terror from the sight of a Voodoo doll carelessly left sitting in the window of a hut.

Zerzan, and many radical writers, scrupulously has avoided actually postulating what is the nature of reality, the unconscious mind, nature and cosmology; yet presumptuously tells us everything they are not. To his credit, Zerzan at least pushes us to the very frontier of philosophy, but voyeuristically leers from outside the window. Could it be that Marx's old taboo about "mysticism and idealism" is the Voodoo doll holding us at bay?

That is one of the main functions of Art—historically, it says what it is, not merely what is not. If it expands our feelings or notions of reality, of perception, or if it is unconscious material rising from premature burial, it is more life, not less. In "Wit and the Unconscious" Freud affirms the connection between Art and the pleasure principal and places Art in the service of play—of "instinctual liberation from the reality principle."

Art has no use value, it is useless. It may be tentacled to a billion-dollar industry, but like food, it is a basic human process, universal. "You could bring down Civilization in fifty years if you eliminate art," Zerzan paraphrases, but you could bring it down in weeks if you eliminated food.

Zerzan's biggest mistake is in trying to posit an "unmediated sensuality" and (a la Bergson—Who the fuck is Bergson?) "thought without symbols." These are definitive traits, distinguishing characteristics of Narcissism. Sensuality is a relationship between distinct subjects, mediated by their characteristics; thought is the differentiating of reality into objects, since it is a mental process the objects are symbolic representations of; only Houdini and the like can move actual objects mentally. If Zerzan is referring to meditation, he should say so and realize that contemplating the void is a departure from thought which requires the utmost passive receptivity as well as a departure from individuality. It could not be a permanent condition except in death. Coincidentally, Freud connects the reality principle with the death instinct; reality unmediated by symbols, images, Art (autonomous symboling)

and other distinguishing characteristics of individuality is death. I personally look forward to it, but wouldn't want it as a way of life.

We need a few doses of death now and then, but we need more life; more versions, more layers, more configurations of reality...we need more pleasure than is available in swollen loins...our desire pushes through cave walls, beyond Venus' mortal light...the woman as seer-Shaman created Patriarchy?...There are secrets in me you will never see... I may let you feel it... my mystery... my Art.

One other question, John. Who explained to the caveman that his painting was Art?

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