

Journal Notes on Art

George Bradford (David Watson)

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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 "Art, Life & Death" by Ratticus.

20 May: Art the enemy

Of course, while in Paris it is one's duty to see the art and the many monuments. This is called "sightseeing." You travel thousands of miles; peasants must be killed, perhaps, to get you there. Certainly whole estuaries have been fouled and species pushed over the critical edge toward extinction. But you cannot deny it: you are in Paris to see the sights and the sites. (Some sociologist has written a book describing tourism as paradigmatic of modernity. Without knowing the details of his argument, it is possible to agree that the rootlessness, the craving for authentic experience, and the pseudopraxis which is only another variant of commodity passivity, all of which characterize the modern traveler or tourist, do represent central elements in modern life. By criticizing it, we in no way escape its implications.)

Monuments—the pseudorepositories of a falsified historical moment—are the most infuriating examples: These imposing, seductive megaliths, columns, spires achieve, fortunately, a life of their own, and our awe is transferred to the aesthetic beauty of form, of volume. Yet there is no denying the insidious messages of grandeur—state pomp and the glory of the chief of state—which reside in them, even in their general form. Columns and obelisks, all massive structures generate an image of the state machine necessary to create them, in all but the most idiosyncratic examples.

And art—creativity reduced to toys, to merchandise; and then this junk transformed into religious relics. Also, you have to consider the enormous amount of the stuff which is presently being produced. The reliquary and the hero-worship have been turned into an industry. No stone is left unturned. Every angle is exploited. Speculative capital rules.

Art and Monuments of Paris

The Pompidou Center—a modernist fantasy. Supposedly creative engineering at work, the guts of this building are on the outside, exposing elevators, walkways, heating ducts, plumbing, all the garbage of modern construction, to the street. It looks like a component of an enormous oil refinery or coal gasification complex. The ugliness poses as a form of honesty, a way of dispensing with the trash without hiding it. The inside of the building is supposed to be what counts—clear out the technology and make way for art. Actually, however, the inside is just as cluttered as the shell—more pipes, more electric stairways, more hanging lights—a giant hangar divided up into dreary galleries by dry-wall. So it isn't honest at all, it conceals what lies beneath, the real motive: technoadoration. It is already boring, like an airport or a modern parking garage and hotel. Everything looks shabby, like a factory. This

is just another eyesore in a world of eyesores. The designer should be dragged behind a speeding car to cure him of his love for technology.

Where the “experience” of the building does not overwhelm the art, the masses who gather there—as they would to begin work in a heat-treating plant—do. At times they crowded the gates leading to the escalators, waiting for an electronic sign to admit them, the museum being too full. One can’t help but see Pompidou’s counterpart in another structure standing nearby, the Forum des Halles, a large shopping complex and metro correspondence filled with escalators, lit up metro maps, neon, rapid people movers, and electronic gates.

Unlike the shopping malls in the U.S., which attempt to pass themselves off as airy, open, clean places with plants and fountains, Les Halles (which replaced the original farmers’ market of the city: progress) is squat, dark despite the neon and florescent lights, filthy, and utterly unappealing, you would think, to even the most domesticated tastes. But there the kids from the working class ghettos in the periphery go to sit on the steps, smoke cigarettes, and be seen. The cops wash down the steps with water, but that doesn’t keep them away for long. (One time, while catching a subway, we chanced upon some Rasta looking drummers pounding their hearts out, but that sort of thing seems anomalous to the place, and it took place at the entrance on a Sunday. In general, you witness the “Brownian Bump” of capital—a fallout shelter in the interim before the Bomb goes off.)

In the Forum des Halles one can find the spiritual twin of Pompidou, and proof that, with certain insignificant variations, capital everywhere heads in the same, ominous direction.

Bring Your Roller Skates

Of course, we went to the Louvre for a couple of hours. You must see it to believe it. Bring your roller skates, and you’ll whiz by dozens of monumental masterpieces every thirty seconds. Again, the impossible crowds. Everyone has the same idea, the same crushing need (here you will truly be crushed by it), to see the relics. Art, art and more art. There is simply too much art, and you get dizzy trying to cope with it.

The best show is the crowds at the Jaconde—the Mona Lisa smiling peaceably the secret of the law of value. And always surrounded by nuns! “Where is the Jaconde?” can be heard in the nearby galleries in a dozen languages. If you get close, the bullet-proof glass reflects the lights and you can’t see her in the glare. Back off, and you see the backs of people’s heads. But why are you there? What are you seeking there? Things have already gone too far. The crowd sways in its frenzy, admiring the quintessential emblem of the culture: a Renaissance gone sour, the “great men” dead and their fragments worshipped in fabulous tombs by passive, denatured zeks. One understands the partially revolutionary character of Duchamp’s addition of a moustache, in fact of many of his pranks—revolutionary because he dared to play with the icons, but only partial since he remained (perhaps unavoidably in the case of that particular experiment) within the limitations of art. By subverting a copy, he increased the value of the original—its cultural and economic value. His parody becomes an appreciation of the original, thus more art, not a critique of the social structure of art, its role in generalized social passivity.

Vandalism: Duchamp’s aesthetic vandalism is superseded by certain “deranged”—derealized—individuals, “emotionally disturbed,” “troubled,” “schizophrenic” (the latter-day names for heretic). These individuals imagine a personal relationship, one would speculate, with the work of art. The piece is threatening them, sending evil messages. Or it represents an evil force and must be symbolically attacked to put an end to the evil influence.

Is this not in a sense a ritualistic or symbolic break with the passivity of the tourists who drool impotently and stupidly before the object in a state-managed, air-conditioned, heavily-guarded museum? This is not to advocate the destruction of works of art, which can be seen themselves as the emergent product of an intuitive, even spontaneously creative moment. Calling for the destruction of art objects is not what is directly relevant. What is necessary is to refuse to be seduced by art, by the world of art, that is to say, by the mystification and concealment of this world. Art isn’t worth it. The dead weight of these objects weighs on living human creativity like a nightmare.

In the Caves—23 May, Cahors, the Dordogne

We have seen four caves and one low hanging rock containing drawings, paintings, glyphs of some kind and sculptures or high relief. Also went to the paleontological museum in Les Eyzies, where we saw many artifacts dating back several tens of thousands of years. Our friend J.-P. brought André Leroi-Gourhan's famous, encyclopedic work, *Prehistoire de l'Art Occidental*, and even carried it into the caves, going over Leroi-Gourhan's discussion of the cave art just before looking at the material in the caves, so he was of great help, though I was equally impressed with the lack of even meager information and speculation available on these places.

On Saturday we saw Font de Gaume, a small cave containing paintings in ochre and black, much of the time, like all of the drawings, following the curvature in the rock ingeniously, to emphasize the form of a snout or leg, or to enhance the sense of motion or the turning of a head. This intimacy with the materials, Lynne remarks to me, shows their closeness to nature in a stunning and even moving manner.

We also saw Combarelles, just down the road, with even more striking drawings (though nothing that is polychromatic—J.-P. tells me that Font de Gaume is the only such cave now open. At Combarelles I got a sense of what Leroi-Gourhan seems to be saying in his complex discussion of sexual symbolism and forces in the cave art. One particularly beautiful drawing showed two opposing horses, one licking the snout of the other delicately, almost poignantly. The realism—I would almost call this cave a “sentimental” realism in its treatment of the animals, as in the section mentioned above and another startling laughing ass or horse—leaves all open to question. No explanations seem satisfactory, though the instrumentalist, one-dimensional explanation that the animals were painted as proxies to facilitate a hunt, seems least likely. Not to argue that such a relationship never exists. Primitives have been reported to draw animals in the sand during ceremonies prior to a hunt, and also imitate their prey during dances leading up to the hunt, so there may be connections, though they are not likely to be as direct as the modern, productivist world would imagine.

But these cave paintings, so remote, so enigmatic, are without a doubt much more than practical transference or simple descriptive realism. We can assume that some magic—or perhaps sorcery, there may be important distinctions—was taking place. But we can guess blessed little about what it meant to them. (Lewis Mumford, in *Technics and Human Development*, repeats the explanation of transference or sympathetic magic, but adds: “But this art was not just an agent of practical magic: it was likewise a higher mode of magic in its own right, as miraculous as the magic of words, yet even more secret and sacrosanct. Like the interior of the cave itself, walled and vaulted by natural forces, which gave man his first insight into the possibilities of symbolic architecture, these images opened up a world of color and form that transcended the esthetic range of natural objects because it likewise included, as an unavoidable ingredient, man's own personality.”)

An Incapacity to Understand

On Sunday we saw the line drawings and engravings at Rouffignac, an enormous cavern, so large that we traveled through it in a miniature train. Later we saw the huge carvings of horses and bison, which had been done under an overhang, and which would have been totally different in character from the normally hidden material, at Cap Blanc. (But since paleolithic art—if we call it art—being such from our perspective, not necessarily from its own—extends over a period of twenty thousand years as far as we know. “To interpret its varied manifestations,” argues Mumford, “as examples of a single paleolithic culture would be absurd, all the more because dates and time sequences are often obscure.” At the overhang at Cap Blanc the guide had to be fetched. He was an old peasant who lived nearby, with an engaging wit and a lovely accent, almost a brogue.

On the last day we saw the grottos at Cougnac, still different from all the others. Here there were many human, probably male (?) figures, being speared or shot through with arrows. Also some possible female figures, and sexual symbols. But nothing was clear. These caves were astonishing for their natural formation alone—thousands of stalactites and stalagmites, being formed at three centimeters a century, some even reflecting ultraviolet light.

But to return to the question of meaning: we can speculate on what it meant to those who did the work. But what does it mean to us?

It could be argued that this question is incoherent, or at least self-serving. I read an interview in *Le Monde* in which Isaiah Berlin argues that it is the very incapacity to understand aesthetic phenomena in their own historic context which renders our perspective inaccurate and untrue. But an historical analysis of “art” presupposes other mediations. In any event, the correspondences which we make with the aesthetic phenomenon give it its meaning for us. What is our relationship, then, with this “art,” these magical formulas, these glyphs or messages?

There are two basic approaches, as well as a third, vague possibility. First of all, the cave drawings as a total critique, a condemnation of this modern world. These representations are more “modern,” more natural, than much of what we have seen in art since civilization emerged—and in fact the very best of our century has in the end been a renewal, a rediscovery, of that aesthetic which we see on those walls.

As Guy Davenport has written in *The Geography of the Imagination*, in an essay entitled “Prehistoric Eyes,” “What is most modern in our time frequently turns out to be the most archaic.” (I think Davenport, a synthesizing, apparently liberal academic, uses the term archaic in a way which blurs the paleolithic or primitive and the neolithic-archaic. There are probably important differences along with the similarities they have in contrast with modernity.)

Their intimate relation with their materials, their perfect, yet ambivalent (are they symbols?) naturalism, their remoteness from any alienated, thing-producing culture, their inverted anti-monumentalism, all stand as a repudiation of modern civilization and of “art.” This is not art. Art does not interest us. This is contact with nature, not a professional or commercial activity. “Art” at its best in our day draws its energy from the same sources. Sometimes, as in the case of an occasional surrealist triumph or modernist discovery, it is a renewal of the primitive. Other times of course, it is an act of plunder.

The cave representations reveal clearly, as Charles Olson noted in “The Kingfishers” (quoted by Davenport), that “We are alien from everything that was most familiar.” How resonant this line is of Debord’s opening statement in *The Society of the Spectacle* that “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation!” I am also reminded of Herbert Read’s comment that you can judge a culture by its pots and pans. This culture puts primitive and archaic cooking implements in museums, while its own reflect a degradation, an impoverishment—pots which once held beans now stand in glass cases surrounded by uniformed guards: absolute proof of our estrangement. We can’t make a pot any longer. We work in factories instead, making them on assembly lines out of materials that never should have been produced. And we look at simple, beautiful objects made to be used, in mausoleums of impotence. In a sense Walter Benjamin’s celebrated dictum can be reversed: every document of “barbarism” (those convivial implements) is a document of “civilization” (our alienation reflected correspondingly in their astonishing beauty). 1

History As Tragedy

Davenport writes, “And cognition? I would swap eyes, were it possible, with an Aurignacian hunter; I suspect his of being sharper, better in every sense. History is not linear; it is the rings of growth in a tree; and it is tragic.”

The sense of tragedy brings to mind the second approach. Perhaps these drawings are linked to the origins of the plague. From what does this mutation, the state, emerge? Wherein this pathology of domination? I read a story by a Huichol artist in an article on Huichol shamanism. The artist told the story to the author while the two were on a mushroom-gathering journey with a shaman and several other Indians. The artist should have been a shaman; he had a visionary power. But once, during a ceremony, when he was in the midst of a profound vision, he suddenly began to feel drunk and to lose the vision. He realized that another Indian, an older shaman, was glaring at him, overpowering him, obliterating his capacity to see in that special way. He never became a shaman; instead he became an artist. (Interesting!) He was never able to recover his earlier capacity.

Why would he want to do such a thing, the writer asked. The Indian answered, Sometimes the shamans lose their sense of proportion, they slip into sorcery.

This passage struck me profoundly and stayed with me for a long time. What was this fine line between shamanism and sorcery? How do communities mutate, become state societies? Perhaps the sorcery begins somewhere in those caves: are they the prototemples of a later age? Will such a line of questioning allow us any insight into the inability of primitive societies to resist civilization? Is a cycle, perhaps foretold in the walls, a westward wandering

perhaps, a cycle of hubris, being completed? The walls remain a mystery. We are left with only our questions, our desire, and our refusal of this civilization which has turned even these hidden corners, these long unseen places, into museums.

The second approach suggests the third, more troubling observation stemming from the caves. If the root of the problem can be glimpsed as far back as the caves themselves, it creates problems for a primitivist vision, problems which have only occurred so far to me in an unclear, inarticulate way. Mumford speculates, for example, that the physical compulsion and controls of early state societies “rested on an ideology and a myth which perhaps had their faint beginnings in the magical ceremonies in paleolithic caves.” Kingship, he points out elsewhere, had to have been “from the beginning a religious phenomena, not just an assertion of physical prowess and organized manpower ...” This mutation which takes place within primitive communities but which leads down the road to the entire program we face today: can it be traced back so far? Is it simply a question, finally, of entropy?

And there is also that sense of extinction, of entropy, in the representations: not only animals which are themselves actually extinct, but the remoteness that these beautiful creations have in relation to ourselves. They are closed to us, like the secret ceremonies. Frustration: we’ve lost touch with our past, lost our way. But our past is intricately woven into our perdition: history as tragedy. There is an overwhelming sense of incoherence in the force of this brazen beauty. But it is the incoherence of our world.

“Appreciating” the aesthetic (i.e. alienated) beauty of these creations may be superior in some way to being oblivious to them. And the agony, the sense of separation, has its insights. But will any of this save us from our own annihilation? Will it change the course of this terrifying deluge, stay or overcome the crisis? Or is it just the heady flower, the baroque delirium of decomposition?

Later, by the river in Cahors: In the local town café in Les Ezyies, the kids were playing “Time Warp” on a pinball machine ...

Impressions Of Art In Madrid: 22 September

Bosch’s paintings in the Prado Museum have changed my feelings about “art”—not comfortable with what I wrote in May, though not ready to guard museums. Bosch somehow doesn’t belong here, but in the streets.

Bosch is painting for primitives, the primitives who will give civilization the final push, and run wild in the garden of earthly delights. Only we today could understand the two shaman figures in Bosch—the antlered deer from *Trois Freres* and a catfish—leading a fallen Christian into Hell, in his painting “Cart of Hay.” And no one is as fit as we, perhaps (though it must have already been quite clear), to perceive the collaboration between scientism, medicine, religion and the university to exorcise the “stone of madness,” the shaman stone, of spontaneity, desire, and visions from the violated brain of the human subject. His painting “Extraction of the Stone of Madness” is an early (or late) intuition of those shock treatments against human culture and community which would eventually transform the human being, a free spirit, into a patient, a student, an obedient member of a “flock” to be ministered to by a pimp of the Holy Whore—transformed, ultimately into a guinea pig and laboratory rat to be incinerated in caves and cellars by the latest advances in science and technology.

Then there is Brueghel’s “Triumph of Death”: the megamachine in action, the already dead hordes of Leviathan, the eternally and universally replaceable parts of the phalanx, massacring life. And Time rides dazzlingly through the center of the painting, cutting a swathe through living flesh with an enormous scythe. In the lower left-hand corner, a skeleton brandishes a sand clock. Plagues, time, a mass machine for killing: a ravaged landscape. Do we not recognize it as our own, as the birth of our world and its limitless and unending (like Death) agony?

Guardias civiles in the museum with machine guns. Did they see me lift some postcards? More cops and art: I see them spraying a crowded gallery with their weapons in pursuit of a shoplifter ...

Saw Picasso’s “Guernica” in the Cason del Buen Retiro. Many of the studies leading up to the final execution of the mural-size painting were startling—screaming women, an entire series of them going from rather empty geometric designs to brutal terror and suffering, in only subtle and often very gradual differences. Also his bulls, his dying horses, guts spilling out from shrapnel wounds (in one a tiny phoenix-like winged horse flies from the wound). The spirit with the lantern, many visions, many versions. Several versions of the mother and dead child.

Yet the painting itself is the least interesting of all, and not because we are prepared for it by the studies, but simply because it does not approach their intensity. It was as if the preliminaries wearied him, and he threw the final project together in haste and tedium in order to be done with it once and for all. None of the elements of the painting comes near to achieving the detailed shriek of pain realized in the smaller works.

An intriguing point: What often remains interesting and even vital about art is that creative process, that exploration—at times the desire. But when it becomes “art,” it begins to lose that focused power. Now it is true that the “studies” are also “art” (in fact Picasso’s doodlings on napkins and in the margins of books are considered art and hang in museums protected by armed guards).

Imperative To “Free” Art

So it becomes imperative to “free” art—that impulse—so that it can disappear into the contours of a beautiful daily life, a tribal life. Not the suppression of art, but of its institutionalization. Obviously the words get in the way. Picasso could have been a shaman—instead he became first an artist, then an institution, like a dike or canal which must be continually tended and guarded.

And “Guernica” stands behind (bullet-proof?) glass, with cameras and an officious guard who told us to back away even from the glass. But what is interesting in that air-conditioned palace is not the mural turned myth by politics and by the art hustle. What is interesting, inspiring, is the restless movement of Picasso’s mind as it played out his desire to unravel certain mythic events on paper and canvas. The doodlings and the studies, almost art, proto-art in a sense, are more profoundly anguished and direct than the giant work of art finally thrown together for the 1937 exposition for which it was commissioned. “Art” is a shadow play—the defenders of art would say, “Very well, all you are arguing is that the best art in this case is the fragmentary, preparatory material. But it is all art.” Yet what strikes me is not the work but how it directly apprehends the material, the experience. If genius—natural, supple and spontaneous—interests me, I must confess that technique does not.² Nor museums. Nor conservation of a given piece. On the contrary, the entering into a dance, the exquisite wandering of the spirit: flight. Flights by correspondence, on wings of analogy. The liberated image. Museums, and art, impede this spirit, though it is often manifest, contradictorily, within art, it is not the property of art. If we are faithful to its call, art will become something altogether different.

Notes

1. Mumford feels the need to place the word civilization in quotation marks also, to reflect the ambivalence. His definition of this qualified “civilization” is sharp: “the centralization of political power, the separation of classes, the lifetime division of labor, the mechanization of production, the magnification of military power, the economic exploitation of the weak, and the universal introduction of slavery and forced labor for both industrial and military purposes.” Its chief identifying mark is “power as an abstraction, power as an end in itself ...” But he must qualify this—civilization has endured, he argues, because “its positive goods, even though they were arrogated to the use of the dominant minority, were ultimately of service to the whole human community, and tended to produce a universal society of far higher potentialities, by reason of its size and diversity.” (*Technics and Human Development*) Here one gets a sense of the serious limitations in Mumford’s perspective. Is it not time for us to submit this notion of “positive goods” and a “universal society,” along with the naive assumption that this represents a diversity rather than a homogenization, to the merciless criticism of a primitivist perspective? There is an ambivalence at play, but not this one.

2. I see the problems in this paradoxical statement. First of all I don’t answer the defense of art. Yes, it is art, but I insist that it is more. Secondly, if what strikes me is how art releases energy, the energy latent in things and in the relations between them, then technique—the how—must be of some interest. But I am interested—delirious—that it is capable of being done. I am not concerned with the manner—that is personal, infinitely varied; a discussion of technique sinks the truth of the vision in an objective morass. Yet immediately technique comes in.

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