

# **Anarchist Aesthetics: A Few Notes Towards a Libertarian View of the Arts**

Kingsley Widmer

1993

# Contents

The Absence of Art . . . . .	7
------------------------------	---

There can't be, of course, an "anarchist aesthetic" in the sense of a doctrine of authoritative rules, a hierarchy of manners and forms and genres, or any orthodoxy of elitist proprieties and subjects or demanded styles and responses. Those impositions unto repression belong with the usual pieties, not with an intellectual perspective essentially rooted in resistance and refusal.

Still, there may be some libertarian perspectives on the making of and relating to what are usually called "the arts" and, in the fancy (not just anthropological) sense, 'culture'. In theory as well as history, there are also some attitudes towards the arts possibly compatible with fuller freedoms and autonomies, egalitarian community, and liberating practices. Less mildly put, we can go for some arts without taking on the crapulous aesthetics, especially the salvational culture cons of hierarchies, which half-disguisedly service dominations and exploitations.

What anarchist would disagree? Well, for one, John Zerzan, the deeply provocative and learned libertarian theorist whose writings I often admire. In his "The Case Against Art" (*Elements of Refusal*) he rejects the sterilities of much postmodernism, theories as well as art commodities, "which is to be art refused in favor of the real." But a more discriminating case might be made even for some postmodernist (continuing modernism) impetus to disrupt the audiences back into parts unaestheticized, unanestheticizing, actualities (some radical conceptualism, mocking assemblages, and others). However, Zerzan's insisted-upon totalizing context is that art has not only long been wrong (examples going back 30,000 years) but has always been dubious. For 'art' is of its essence 'estrangement' from direct responses, the displacement of "unsatisfied desire," alienation by way of "symbolic division" of experience away from the organic, immediate, and spontaneous. While I think that a suspiciously one-kind-only definition of art, and its sort of experience, part of its purpose, rightly enough, is to put down the division of labor and cultural authority, the vicious specialization of the shaman-become-artist-become-priest. Art as power, sacralized culture as control, aestheticism as inauthenticity.

This may be appropriate counter to some current ostensibly libertarian "aesthetics of social ecology" (such as Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*), which anti-modernistically (and Bookchinily) promotes arts "emphasizing our essential interconnectedness rather than our separateness, forms evoking the feeling of belonging to a larger whole rather than expressing the isolated, alienated self." Sounds libertarianly hopeful, but that is to be done by would-be upbeat communal art-experiences formed by shaman artists, exploiting all the dubious mythologies handy, recreating an enchanting religion of art, for which there seem to be plenty of aspirants, and New Age markets. That historical repetition, too, threatens to turn tragedy into farce.

Radical primitivist Zerzan will have none of such aesthetic imposition—he accepts art as primarily symbolization (there are counter-theories) just to bang symbolizers on their fat heads as formers of repressive culture. Only after the death of over-mediated, falsifying and controlling, arts, he concludes his essay: "Play, creativity, self-expression and authentic experience will recommence..." But some of us are prepared, on perhaps equally libertarian grounds, to find some such art of human reality even in our : mortuary culture and times. Because the freely human is never totally lost or absent—much of our libertarian view .absolutely depends on that—though often obscured by the dominant, and counterfeited, as in contemporary, especially American, culture.

Because, too, art may be primordial. But Zerzan is not admitting that. In a more recent essay, "Future Primitive" (*Anarchy* #33, Summer 1992), he again deploys part of his anti-art argument by linking it as symbiotic not with nature but ritual, thus shamanism, dominance, anti-life transcendentalism, caste authority, and repression. But his rather puritan iconoclasm is not quite

complete; there are some semi-art exceptions, and even stern Zerzan concludes his defense of the primal primitive with an artful image of the central African Mbuti people delightedly “dancing with the forest, dancing with the moon.” I take that, right there, and not least in its pleased replay by Turnbull, and then victorious poetic-intellectual re-replay by Zerzan as part of primal art play.

Other theorists can also play at primal nature analogies. I live a few hundred yards from a Pacific Ocean bluff and, repeatedly on days with a good onshore breeze, plant myself against a blasted cypress and watch one or another bird at play. With a vibrating holding pattern where the up-thermals precariously balance with the in-breeze above the bluff, a bird sideslips lower right and then vibrantly hovers in the current, sideslips lower left and vibrantly hovers, sideslip by sideslip z-ing down until hitting the turbulence at the bluff edge, and then swoops back high to repeat the vibrant hovering game. I have watched one do it for as long as half an hour. Is it really primal play? I can't know the birds' motives, only the immanent analogy (art experience!). It is high skill of a strong, always solitary bird, hence not a group ritual-requirement, not mating, not food hunting, nothing utilitarian, done with real brio and an appearance of fulfilling delight. I suggest it (adapting of course from some antique poets, including Hopkins) as an image of the artist-the skilled disinterested delight of the player; and of art-it has an entrancing shape for both the creator and the non-airborne observer. It can be more experiential than symbolizing, which I see as the libertarian response.

But of course, I can't rest, only suggest, my case on a possible anthropomorphic projection, though it seems a rather good one. So on to a prehistoric people. I have (for other reasons than this argument) been reading archeological reports and ethnographic interpretations of the Pomo people of central coastal California, and even checking my responses with the far more knowledgeable (especially simpatico archaeologists Vera-Mae and David Fredrickson). In rough summary of some of the art role: For some thousands of years, until enslavement and near-genocide by the EuroAmericans, these hunter-gatherers lived in a relatively stable and simple culture of peacefully nomadic foraging cycles. Without lavish civilizing by pueblos and pots, much less ownership and armies, their arts were well-crafted obsidian and other primary tools, exceptional basketry (by which they are above all aestheticized in modern museum terms), and celebratory decoration and play. The reed baskets were not just functional, either in decoration or in some of their uses, which included highly distinctive and expressive incorporation of playfully varied, not just tradition-bound, color patterns, feathers, shells, no doubt artfully heightened for gift-exchange, rituals, and other games. The games included the costumed funereal and (closely related to my mind) gambling with carved and decerated sticks. The fine art-crafters-there was not, of course, our invidious class and caste distinctions for work and art-were honored for what they did well but did not have privilege and power in other areas, such as acorn milling and operating the salmon weirs. Authority seems to have been primarily nonce-leadership-taken for the particular activity and occasion by those thought to have the skill, the knowledge, the being, to do well what was desired done-a good anarchist definition of authority-and not least in artistic crafting. (Even enduring ceremonial 'chiefs', I am led to believe, held that very limited role because of appropriate knowledge and art; for example, the bilingually articulate-the intellectual-serving as hosts to distant visitors.) In sum: it takes an awfully narrow view of human delight to deny the play of art within egalitarian and cooperative community.

To step briefly beyond the play of birds and primitives (though I suggest never being altogether beyond them), the historical defense of art as creative play has not incidentally been yoked with

demands for freedom and rebellions against authority (as with German romantic Friedrich von Schiller, and such part adaptations as Herbert Marcuse's). Authoritarian philosophers (Plato the classic Western example) have condemned the irreverent playfulness as well as ecstatic incitements of art. *Homo ludens* seems difficult to contain and control. The playful tends to pursue its own delights, shapes, rhythms, forms. Hence the sense of freedom, as against necessity, such as work, more predetermined and controlled. The libertarian minded thus want to turn much of work into play (as Charles Fourier argued for the Utopian phalanstery). The domination minded want to turn play into work-ordered mad competitiveness, specialized hierarchies, profitable and otherwise exploitable. Art play may come from the realm of primal freedom, as I suspect, but has always been corruptible into religion and other rule, trade and other conning, schooling and other indoctrination, long before capitalist commodification and power iconology. American culture may also have peculiar other imperatives, puritan and evangelical, for controlling and vitiating the semi-autonomy of play.

Surely much of our culture is corrupt, often viciously so, and its arts used against the freely human. Though the control and exploitation of play is indeed ancient, perhaps no ordering has so relentlessly corrupted play, whether as sports or arts -games, entertainments, advertisements, schooling, indeed most of culture-as late-America. A ballplayer or a painting huckstered for millions of dollars are similarly absurd. Play is obviously dangerous in its protean possibilities, which have often become exploitations, but is that sufficient argument for its elimination? Better remove all profit and power from all forms of play, as even any moderate libertarian surely must hold. Certainly no writer/painter/performer deserves better pay and living than secretary/carpenter/garbage man. Liberation, of course, requires many such negations, symbolic as well as literal.

Negation also may apply within the corrupted culture of dominated games: Free play within controlled play as the reassertion of freedom. "Taking liberties." Mock celebrations, inverted rituals, graffiti on the sacred sign, joked-up icons, subversive readings of the holy texts, are enduringly defiant responses to demeaning work. Here I lump all sorts of defiance-in-and-on, not just burlesque, as parody. It, too, is as ancient as the controlling culture. Confirm with the Native American Trickster (Coyote), Cynic mockeries ("Diogenes a Socrates gone mad" said a moralist of the time), Saturnalia and Feast of Fools, antinomian inversions and heretical twistings (some heresies liberating in spite of themselves), and, especially in modern times, protest and riot (arts so fearfully misdescribed). Repeatedly since the Enlightenment (as with Diderot), libertarian views and the arts have been linked in the defiant reporting of marginal life (bohemianism, and its beat, hip, and other countering successors). Good. I would also suggest including much else, such as an endless gallery of mock-rogues (Simplicissimus, Falstaff, Schweik, McMurphy, Hayduke, *et. al.*) who use and delightfully abuse the given artistry to reverse the given restrictions and dominations. Some hustles are liberating parody. The artful play of reversal is often our finest cultural legacy, bird-people playing the contrary winds.

Not all parody is subversive (neither is all sabotage, some of which is the speeded up brutality inherent in the system), but the greater problem of discrimination may be peculiarly contemporary: Much, indeed, of modernism in the arts for more than a century has been parodistic, as with Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and, indeed, the recurrent impetus of avant-garde anti-arts, even still with postmodernism. Take for brief continuing example collage, the disjunctive mixing of varied arts and varied bits of other realities, undercutting given symbolic stasis and its pieties. It may be the major anti-form form of recent generations, and not surpris-

ingly is much used by anarchists (as in *Anarchy*). (Paul Mann is currently good on collage in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, and on its double-double play in which in our culture “every exit is a revolving door.”) The traditional totems of order, including pyramidized sensibility, are displaced by parodistic collages, assemblages, installations, performances, decommodified conceptions, participatory deconstructions. The low arts of the high topsy-turveyed, the culture wisely fucked-over from within.

To become new exploitable totems? (This is part of Mann’s argument, which seems to suggest that our truest art may not claim or be recognized as Art at all.) Parody, too, becomes product, anti-art just another fashion (such as the savaging Kienholzs a well-funded and well-praised establishment), all voraciously sucked into commodity and power display and domination. The libertarian might well despair at the voracious co-opting of oppositions, not least in its playful forms. But freeing play still goes on. And isn’t that, not mere winning (the simulacrum of which is one of the dirtiest tricks of all), our real aesthetic? After all, winning is everything, everything wrong in our culture. Anarchists counter not just because they must and should but because of, and by, freely playing against.

To the primal, the parodistic, and the reversed add other sorts of cultural countering. Most aesthetics have a canon, an explicit or implied group of texts, objects, forms, styles, which illustrate (and often covertly subsume) the cultural principles and politics. To a strategic degree, even anarchism can and does a bit of that, open-endedly one hopes, necessary to the persuasive texture of a perspective. Some images, texts, responses, rightly enough, seem more pertinent than others (I have passingly suggested some above, and will add others, without claiming any orthodoxy). Correcting the canon has recently been a proper political project with left-liberals, fashionably adding feminist, gay, official ethnic minorities, the ecologically positive, even the decent-to-animals, cultural artifacts. Sometimes, however, just any arty detritus which • seems anti-Eurocentric male gets appropriated and other dissident play dispossessed. ‘Multi-culturalism’ may still serve the swindles of controlling culturism. As with much reformism, this leaves the system, such as approved materials for standard schooling and other cultural marketing, and affirmatively ersatz identifications, intact, even reinforced. Anarchist iconoclasm should also apply here.

A possibly more subtle re-canonizing goes on more continuously, with a minority of the learned, modifying the roles within (as I attempted more than a generation ago with cauterizing a bit Milton’s poetry, lavishly raising up Melville’s *Bartleby*, trying to include more rebellious writers and artists’, etc.). But countering what dominates, deconstructing the canon, remains obvious, and perhaps better, work with libertarian possibilities. (Down with overupholstered Shakespeare, as Lawrence said, though I admit some fondness for his most playful tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*.)

No anarchist sacral texts, then, or any other kind. Not counter-canons so much as countering cultural beatifications. Not any aesthetic even of, say, free-form group dancing or singing or jazz, though they have their libertarian virtues, not least against, say, militarized classical ballets and symphonies. Liberating culture may be where you find it-not everything goes against, but more than is often admitted-and where you parody it into freer play. Literalism, of course, especially within the arts, is too easy to be interesting and enlivening-no countering winds. The return to the primal or archaic might better be a reference point rather than a program (contra Zerzan?). This late in the culture games, after some millennia of more false and manipulative than authentic arts, much of what passes for the spontaneous is also inculcated and could also use some

iconoclastic countering. In “creative writing,” for example, the least conscious and contrary are often the most crassly imitative, unto awful subservience, in their pseudo-sincerity. Perhaps even the monumentalizers of our technocracy are ‘sincere’ and ‘creative’, viciously so. (Anarchist aesthetics may require one to hack out a good gob of phlegm when hit with the honorific cant of controlling culturism.) Better to trust the oppositional, until proven wrong, that is, successful, which then requires new parody, new liberation, and other counterings.

No doubt my aesthetic reflections are partly crippled from my being an habitual inmate of libraries and museums, and fettered with the intellectual’s defensive irony. Hence I self-skeptically make no totalizing claim for any anarchist aesthetic, which may well find other freedoms than mine. But one can, I libertarianly hope, also counteringly learn. Artful play is where you find and live it, like the bird against the contrary winds.

*Kingsley Widmerhas attempted to apply libertarian aesthetics to some variety of literatim and other culture in ten scholarly-critical books.*

## The Absence of Art

*A response to Kingsley Widmer by John Zerzan*

I am in full agreement with Kingsley that art, as he cogently points out, has been employed to good effect for iconoclastic, critical purposes. There have certainly been rebellious artists, and playful ones-not exclusive categories, to be sure.

It may also be true, however, that an absence of art is not synonymous with an absence of pleasure. It is in this context that Kingsley tries, by the use of terms like the “play of art” and “primal art play,” to deny the distinction between art and play. And here the question is less whether I have been ‘stern’ and ‘puritan’ to imagine an absence of art, as it is whether the two million years’ worth of humans were who felt no need of it.

In “The Case Against Art” I suggested that art is a compensation for the erosion of play, that symbolic activity is a pale substitute for a sensual life in nature unmediated and unbounded by representation. Given that our species was as intelligent by about two million years ago as it is today, it seems the appearance of art (c. 30,000 years back) reflected an equally recent and unforeseen descent into domestication and the decidedly unplayful as a way of life.

Anarchist library  
Anti-Copyright



Kingsley Widmer  
Anarchist Aesthetics: A Few Notes Towards a Libertarian View of the Arts  
1993

Originally published in *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #35 – Winter '93

[en.anarchistlibraries.net](http://en.anarchistlibraries.net)