

Michlig, Christopher. Interview with John Zerzan.
(Excerpt)

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Interview

Christopher Michlig, John Zerzan

We've talked a bit about the advent of social networks, Community Memory in particular, and I'm curious about the evolution of your view of this phenomenon from where we are today.

Christopher
Michlig

I think it's clear that the more wired we are, the more isolated and lonely we are. Being increasingly immersed in technology is not the only factor in this, but it is very prominent. More and more connected to the machine is not the path to really being connected, and I'd say that this is becoming increasingly obvious. More shootings, more autism, more people living alone, etc. Count the ways. So Community Memory facilitates neither community nor memory in the larger picture. There's no substitute for the face-to-face, the unmediated.

John
Zerzan

You've brought up the idea of an "urban aboriginal" in our conversations. Henri Lefebvre has written about the possibility of people managing urban spaces for themselves, having a "right to the city," as a hopeful vision of cities beyond capitalism and the state. Is the urban aboriginal engaged in concrete action to reclaim the city, or is he/she engaged in a "deterritorialization" of urban space, movement by movement, as a kind of adaptation to urban life?

CM

The "urban aborigine" term I got from a poet friend. I resonates with me in the sense that it conjures up the rewilding or de-domestication direction that I think is necessary. Part of this is distinctly practical, does not shrink from a literal sense of reconnecting with the earth. In this enveloping crisis some of us have reached the conclusion that the future, if we are to have a future, must be in some sense primitive. Hence we are going to need 'primitive skills or earth skills—such as

JZ

taught at Rewild Portland, by the way. And I hasten to add that taking this seriously also means coming to grips with the understanding that it ultimately means the end of cities. Exactly the opposite of what is now so ascendant, the age of the megalopolis, conglomerates of tens of millions of people. Forced off the land now and since the beginning civilization with the city an artificial and unsustainable creation. No city, as everyone knows, is not dependent on what is not city. The reason that civilization is chronic war, by the way, is that cities must guarantee their lifeblood viz. trade. Competition, armies, war: the familiar reality for the past few thousand years. In the age of the nation-state it's really no different at base, although cities qua cities are of course no longer the central operators. I do see Lefebvre's "right to the city" as the right to a basically estranged urban existence, an adaptation to it. From an anti-civilization perspective, cities must be questioned and undone. They put a distinct limit on rewilding, on becoming aboriginal, on recovering from our domesticated state. Nonetheless we can start working on this process now, where we live, which is often in cities!

I've heard you refer to an "anarchy aesthetic." What does that conjure up for you? Do you see a possible bridge between what is usually thought of as theory and the realm of art vis-à-vis such an aesthetic?

C M

The space between theory and art is a difficult gap to bridge—neither translates readily into the other, and that's a condition that I'm drawn to as an artist. Prior to discovering art I was a sociology student and remember being daunted by the "in the field" aspect of the discipline as it seemed so entrenched in existing systems and protocols. When I discovered art it was a watershed moment—it's a space where multiple, often conflicting ideas or subjects can be synthesized conceptually and

contextually, and there is a powerful communicative dimension to that—nothing is off limits. I would say that through synthesis art is able to make strong allusions to theory, but there is never a concrete connection. The interpretative space in art is the temporarily, or potentially liberative space for the viewer—it’s a “free” space—and that’s critical. There are numerous instances of art being a progressive social force when political conditions are untenable because of its unique ability to critique culture from within culture. All of that being said, materials, formal considerations and context can go a long way to get at what I would refer to as an “anarchy aesthetic.” It’s slippery of course because “anarchy” itself is such an obtuse term when considered generally—it has its own historical and theoretical trajectory and the worst case scenario would be an instance where it’s scope is oversimplified. I think of certain characteristics such as decentralization of the author/artist through some kind of collaborative aspect, or of a “gift” economy introduced by the artist to the larger public, or intentional misuse of technology or social systems as being artistic ideas that are also anarchistic. Christopher D’Arcangelo’s 1978 performance at the Louvre where he removed the 1745 Gainsborough painting “Conversation in a Park” from the wall and placed it on the floor, directly in front of where it had previously hung, is a good example—it raises basic questions about received cultural value and spectatorship. The artist Barry Johnston frequently uses his phone number in performances and works, which I find extremely provocative when considering the simultaneous distancing and deprivatization of daily life vis-à-vis unrelenting technological momentum—it’s a kind of self-sabotage. Daniel Joseph Martinez’s robotic body-double that lays on the ground in violent seizures or acts of self mutilation is an incredible subversion of a technology that is otherwise universally considered productive and inventive in the public imagination.

Public works “surrender” in a similar way, opening themselves up to a range of possible use, misuse, violence, etc.

JZ Tell us a bit about the trajectory of your art practice. Where do you see it going and what are influences for you along the way in terms of works and artists?

CM **On one hand I have a very conventional studio practice—I make collages and prints and sculptures and exhibit them in more or less conventional spaces for art. I’m interested in outmoded print media as a raw material because of its previous momentum and energy as a communicative medium and I attempt to capitalize on outstanding aesthetic qualities. In relation to the idea that the “event” of language at its origin can be thought of as a negative, I’m consistently modulating, quieting and disrupting legibility, in an effort to evoke a “pre-language” reaction to gesture in the viewer. I love moments when language, in its conventional form, isn’t sufficient to say what needs to be said. I would say I’m heavily influenced by the material economy of Arte Povera, the formal acuity of the Bauhaus, and the social recklessness of Fluxus. As an educator I’m extremely influenced by my students, how they view the world, how they envision themselves creatively—so in that sense my influences are constantly changing. At the moment I’m researching histories of art-pedagogy, and I’m reconsidering what it means to be a teacher and mentor.**

You’ve described the progress of language, the “machinery of language” as “a steadily debasing process”, in the ways that it creates false separations and objectifications through its symbolizing power. This notion resonates heavily with my own interest in handling language - in its visual, material forms—as a raw collage material. My instinct is that its symbolic power can be manipulated, softened, even destroyed in

some circumstances. Does language have a liberative dimension within its negative origins and trajectory? I'm thinking of poetry, fiction, etc.

Indeed we need to find liberatory possibilities within language. I am mainly a writer and so I feel this challenge even as I've tried to develop a critique of symbolic culture. In terms of the latter, this largely emerged as I noticed that the beginning of symbolic culture paralleled the beginning of hierarchy and inequality, just before domestication/agriculture arrived. If this is somehow more than just a coincidence, what is suggested is that there's something inherently negative in the symbolic, including of course language and art. One might also conjecture, conversely, that language and art might not be needed in a disalienated world. But, again, we do what we can within this overall culture, with the materials we have.

JZ