

THE ART WORLD BENEATH OUR FEET: THE ZYMOGLYPHIC MUSEUM AND ITS MISSION

By Peter Frank

Since about the time some homo sapiens, or reasonable facsimiles thereof, first rendered images on the walls of a cave¹, said species has regarded itself as distinct from – above – nature. Sure, has gone the thinking, nature is a creative force, maybe bigger and fiercer than we'll ever be, but in its very elementality it is not an *artistic* force, y'know, the way we are. In other words, nature makes the world, we make art.

Not so fast. We make the world, too – for better or worse. The whole ecological movement places responsibility for the recent, increasingly drastic changes in the natural order at our feet. We have a demonstrable impact upon the natural order, locally and (increasingly) globally, as do no other sentient beings. Therefore, it would stand to reason that, if we can make the world (even though we can't seem to make it to our liking)², nature can make art.

Look at it another way. “Art,” at least as much as beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It is a matter of perception, a condition of discourse, not an inherent quality. If someone sees something as art, it's art. If someone says something is art, it's art. That doesn't make it good, worthwhile, or an embodiment of truth or morality. Designating something as art doesn't let it off the hook. Art can be inhumane, reprehensible, evil, and still be art.³ And, in this regard, art can be entirely amoral, sourced in non-sentient forces beyond even the social impulses of, oh, creatures of air and sea. Neither fish nor fowl can see “art,” and don't need or care to. But we see their coloration, their shapes, their sounds as art. Scientists band such creatures; perhaps artists should sign them.⁴

All this is proffered in defense of – no, actually, as explanation for – the philosophy underlying the Zymoglyphic Museum and the realm of art and inquest it serves to repose. The objects collected by and into the Museum have relied as much on the intervention of nature for their existence and identity as on the intervention of humans, perhaps more so. They are organically produced or naturally modified. Of course, they are naturally produced, as are we all.⁵ But they escape the norms of natural production in falling through nature's cracks, as it were, having been subjected to metamorphic forces which have degraded or otherwise transformed them into forms and presences we tend, in context, to regard as unusual – unusual not simply in their appearance, but in their “artful” effect upon us. Or do we, in regarding them as art, have an artful effect on them? This conundrum of appearances – nature just does its thing, we come along and designate various of its caprices “art,” and all of a sudden nature is the ultimate artist – drives the Zymoglyphic Museum and indeed the whole Zymoglyphic ethos.

¹ Lascaux, say, or Altamira.

² Our supposed degradation of nature is in fact nothing more than a degradation of the nature that sustains us. When natural conditions become inhospitable, they will still be natural conditions.

³ Karlheinz Stockhausen declared the 9/11 attacks a work of art, acknowledging the craft of their perpetrators and recognizing in the attacks the experience of Kantian sublimity.

⁴ Any number of artists have come close – Jannis Kounellis, for instance, exhibiting stabled horses in his gallery show, Piero Manzoni signing live nude women – but no one has applied Duchamp's concept of the Readymade directly to animals. Plants, perhaps, but not animals....

⁵ As Jackson Pollock noted, “I *am* nature.”

Yes, there is a Zymoglyphic ethos. There needs to be. Where otherwise would art end and nature begin? Or, rather, how would we otherwise explain the fact that nature doesn't seem to leave off where art begins (and vice versa)? Yes, it is an ethos, transcending (while not abandoning) aesthetics, encompassing human impulses and needs. It feeds on itself, self-evidently, narrowing the ethical argument down to one of aesthetics after all – but that in itself comprises an ethical argument, or, more to the point, a demonstration of an ethically charged condition. Is it right to artify nature?⁶ Is this some kind of attempt to colonize the natural world, to insist that it once again “perform” for (the benefit of) humans?

The delights provided us by the Zymoglyphic Museum's myriad selections, and even by the relatively elaborate annotations and codifications with which the Museum provides its holdings, are themselves self-evident. The poetry of form, lyricism of association, and economy of function that define every concatenation, that pervade every diorama, rivet us to these apparitions, cementing our fascination and our affection. By inference, they cement our fascination and affection to nature itself. Perhaps that gilds the lily, so to speak. But, even in this era of ecological fetishism, perhaps not.⁷

The Zymoglyphic Museum itself did not spring fully blown from the hands and minds of ecological fetishists. Its contents were preceded on this earth by everything from tree architecture to the juxtapositional reveries of the surrealists. Indeed, the Museum's holdings would seem to reawaken many of Andre Breton's most profound and most capricious dicta,⁸ and its two-dimensional features descend from the narrative collages of Max Ernst and the photomontages of his dada compeers. And, just as those collages and photomontages begat the ever more riotous and cinematic elaborations of Bruce Conner, Jordan Belson, Akbar del Piombo, Sätty, and a host of others, the surrealists' freestanding confabulations led to a burgeoning assemblage “movement” that may have crested in the early 1960s but has never truly abated.

The Zymoglyphic Museum is itself the latest – arguably ultimate – in a long cascade of gentle Wunderkammers. The modern “museum” indeed began as such a phenomenon, a trophy house of oddments compiled by a particularly vital-minded (or bored) nobleman. Refined, almost refracted, into the carefully collected, carefully crafted lesson in art and/or science we know as today's museum, the Wunderkammer still proposed a spirit of ravenous, unfettered adventure, whether one that roamed the globe or one that roamed the neighborhood. For instance, the Zymoglyphic Museum's most immediate predecessor, the famed, if short-lived, Fred Gallery, featured items isolated from an emphatically constricted region.⁹

Still and all, the Zymoglyphic Museum, not least in its dedication to the artfulness of the non-human spirit, distinguishes itself among centers devoted to the found and/or founded object. Such an object may

⁶ There are, not surprisingly, many precedents. To name one, as reported by musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky, his “furfuraceous” friend, Fluxus artist Ken Friedman, claimed the March 1971 Sylmar earthquake as the last movement of his Third Symphony.

⁷ Drill, baby, drill.

⁸ In the early 1930s, to make the Expositions Surréalistes ever more provocative, Breton invited his surrealist minions to produce objects, especially objects invented from other, already extant objects. This is precisely what Nature has done here (with a little help from its friends).

⁹ The region consisted approximately of the streets around Columbia University In The City Of New York, not to mention the campus itself. It is no accident that at least one of the Zymoglyphic Museum's founders had a hand in founding and maintaining the closet-sized, world-shaking Gallery, dedicated, of course, to the proposition that “Art Is Dead, Long Live Fred.”

or may not have been touched by human hands in its formulation; but it took Nature to formulate it in its essence, and it took humankind to call it “art.” Is Fred itself, then, dead? No, but, thanks to Nature,¹⁰ Art is still alive.

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¹⁰ ...and, it goes without saying, the crew of experts comprising Team Zymoglyphic...