

Comment on AVANT's interview with John Zorn

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Over his career, John Zorn has repeatedly ignored criticism by his audiences. He has written defensively of African American musicians criticizing him—in his words—for “ripping off the blues” and of being “a cultural imperialist” on his CD *Spillane* (Strickland 1991: 130). When confronted by the Asian American artists’ group Godzilla West and other Asian American artists and activists and by the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) about images used in his CD *Leng T’che* of an Asian person who had been tortured to death and those in his CD *Torture Garden* of bound and gagged nude Japanese women, Zorn at first would not comment (Beels 1994; Lee 1994a; Wong 1994). After press coverage critical of the use of these images led to the cancellation of two gigs scheduled in San Francisco and New York, Zorn agreed to meet with members of CAA AV, only to back out of the meeting after it was publicized (Hamilton 1993; Hisama 2004: 82-83; Lee 1994b).

Zorn’s opening statement in his recent interview with AVANT projects an unexpected change in the persona he has been shaping throughout his career: “Taking responsibility is the most important step in a person’s life, a step that really brings you forward in becoming a thinking, conscious contributor to the world, and it is something I take very seriously.” I was happy to hear that nearly two decades after the controversy over *Spillane*, *Leng T’che* and *Torture Garden*, Zorn was finally articulating an awareness of how an artist should take into account “the big picture” and that he seemed to be advocating the position that artists should acknowledge the relationship between their work and the world.

But upon reading further into the interview, my delight turned to dismay. Zorn's assertion that "[t]he best way for an artist to serve the world of truth and beauty is in listening to their muse without compromise—and ignore what the audience may demand of them" does not square with his initial statement about the necessity for an artist to take social responsibility. One might assume that a "thinking, conscious contributor to the world" would want to listen to audiences' responses and respond in turn to what listeners apprehend in the music. Yet Zorn insists that "it is best to ignore [the audience] as much as possible and keep on working."

Zorn's distinction between the artist, who "listens to their own inner voice," and the entertainer, who "listens to the voice of the outside world," sets up a false dichotomy and unhelpfully dismisses as "entertainers" those who want to process the reception of their work. Understanding how one interacts with the world and how one's work impacts other people, including audiences, is indeed a crucial step for many artists, and not only for those who understand their work as texts that are read, heard, and interpreted by diverse populations with varying subject positions.

Also troubling in this interview is Zorn's invocation of the artist's "muse" and "truth and beauty." These romanticized views of the origin and use of art hearken back to Zorn's claim in a 1993 interview with Cole Gagne that "I've got to follow my artistic vision," despite criticism of the racist and sexist elements upon which that vision depends (Gagne 1993: 530-31). After a lecture I gave on Zorn at an East coast university, an audience member suggested that if Zorn's work bothered me, that I should simply ignore it. But art, and scholarship about it, should not be limited to exploring only "truth and beauty" but should allow for individual voices to communicate their responses to the work and to articulate the larger social effects of that work on communities of listeners. Ignoring voices of the "outside world" may enable Zorn to just "keep on working" in a grand solipsistic bubble, allowing the outside world contact with him only when it bestows upon him more recognition. Those who truly want to contribute something to the world must be willing to participate in dialogue about the meanings and possibilities of art.

Zorn cloaks himself as an artist inspired by his muse, making music despite any criticism offered, and blithely divides the world of improvisers and improvisations using the simplistic binary of "good" and "bad." He has reaped much recognition and financial success—most notably, the MacArthur "Genius" Award in 2006 and the William Schuman Award from Columbia University's School of the Arts in 2007, and the production of his monodrama *La Machine de l'Être* at New York City Opera in 2011.

In contrast, the work of female and Asian American musicians, composers, and improvisors remains steadfastly outside many canons—of concert programming, university courses, books, anthologies, and recordings. The ubiquity of one artist illuminates the absence of many.

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