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Cosmopolitan Entities – the Art of Bob Rizzo

Markus Ehrhard talks with the American artist
(Translated from the German)

Sculptures from Africa and North American tribal art have brought out in Bob Rizzo a combination of curiosity and fascination. They are reflected in his work in such very different forms such as drawing, painting, collage, print, sculpture, installation, performance and music. In 1975 he began to exhibit his works as part of the *American Painters in Paris Exhibition* in the *Palais de Congrès* (Paris). In the same year, he created his first *Performance and Installation Branch Prop* in Strasbourg, France. Back in Rhode Island, Bob Rizzo exhibited his works at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (RISD), and was involved in a multitude of exhibits in the United States. Until 2004, Bob promoted and curated successful exhibits of contemporary art for over 30 years as a local government arts administrator.

Markus Ehrhard: Bob, where and how were you introduced to African sculpture?

Bob Rizzo: I had always been interested in tribal art. As a child, I visited the traditional Native American Pow Wows with my parents. I made all kinds of headdresses and costumes. I'm sure that it was during one of the many visits to an ethnological museum, that I began to notice African objects. These were often exhibited beside Native American objects. What I noticed right away, was the similarities between the objects and the particular power of the African pieces.

ME: What made you curious? Was it the materials used, the abstract form of the bodies, the mysticism?

BR: I would say that it was a lot of things that fascinated me. It was the "other worldliness" of the sculptures. The material, the power, the combination of materials, the treatment of the surfaces. I could say that these objects were not just "art". The objects encompassed a mystery which was foreign to a young caucasian boy. I wanted to understand why these materials were combined. Why were some pieces covered with dried blood, oil, feathers, etc. I wanted to find out what gave these ordinary objects, like drums, flutes, and knives, such magic. There was something going on there, but I couldn't understand exactly what it was. Only later did I realize how perfect the design and how unique the understanding of the form was. I can't say that I saw an object as abstract – rather, it sharpened the way I saw things.

ME: Does African sculpture offer you then the foundation for your work?

BR: Yes, it does. The African sculpture, body ornaments and jewelry, the treatment of found objects like bottle caps or bits of plastic waste, which are attached and arranged on the body, influences my work. It inspires me to combine completely unrelated objects to create an entirely new story out of them.

ME: When one looks more closely at your totem "The Collector" (Fig. 2a, 2b) for example, one discovers a collection of small objects. We know feathers, cowry shells, coins, seed pods, beads, tiny bells, rusty nails and bone fragments through African fetish figures. But

you also use objects from your environment, like the horns and teeth of American buffalo, admission tickets to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, dog tags, the turned legs of an antique piece of furniture, and a wooden hat form, as well as diverse objects found in Greece and India. What criteria do you use when searching for, finding and then combining these many objects?

BR: The decision about pieces to be worked into an object varies from sculpture to sculpture. In the case of "The Collector". I chose things which I enjoyed collecting. The fact that I worked animal teeth and a buffalo horn, feathers and beads into the piece is because of my interest in Native American culture. I collected the old nails out of 19th-century houses, some are from my own house (built in 1917). My father built the base for this sculpture, to wind electric extension cables around, in the 1950s. The Indian bells come from a collection of bells from all over the world. The Greek objects reflect my love of Greece and the inspiration that I got from shrines along Greek roads, just like inspiration comes through those admission tickets to museums or dog tags. All of them are little mementos, souvenirs of journeys and experiences. In many ways, "The Collector" is a self-portrait. Other collectors feel the same way, as I have learned. It's currently owned by Rand Smith from the Rand Tribal Art Gallery. He was immediately taken by this figure. I would also say that all my other works in the totem series contain similar themes. When I begin a piece, I start with a basic form and then build on that. Since I also collect tribal art, I am surrounded by objects which reflect this interest in one sense or another. Furthermore I often go on long walks, and collect what I find on them. That's part of my daily ritual. I am consequently focused on my walks and connected with my surroundings. All the things that find their place on an object are full of memories of these walks. For the observer it might also awaken memories of childhood or a walk in the woods, something like that. For me, memory plays an important part in the ritual of making my work.

ME: You allow the observer the possibility for personal reflection in your sculptures, for example the childhood memories you mentioned. What's more, your work offers a kind of projection screen for further introspection. Which questions do you ask beyond that, or, what discussion would you like to address with your work?

BR: I am very interested in the idea of the mystical. The idea that there is something else there we don't know or understand. This is especially the case in tribal art. There are all sorts of theories and studies about what an object means, or the power it has. I aim for this in some of my works. I want my objects to captivate the observer in such a way that one begins to look for a deeper meaning in the installations and compositions, for the "other" meaning of this attached object. Should the arranged beads mean something in particular, or are they just body jewelry? Why is a certain object placed just here on the sculpture? I make very conscious decisions about how one object relates to another. I don't just nail things together. I have determined that my works speak mainly to tribal art collectors. They understand better the positioning and the different objects in relationship to the whole object. They understand my visual language. Like I said before, I love it when such a simple thing like a bottle cap from anywhere in the world can have another use and another meaning.

ME: Your sculptures, like "Object of Desire" (Figure 3), from your series on shrines, remind me of the curiosity cabinets and collections of Baroque Europe, put together by scholars and aristocrats, and which symbolize study and knowledge, but also mortality and impermanence. What symbolism do you pursue with your form of expression?

BR: Funny, that you say that about the curiosity cabinet, because sometimes I think I live in one! My shrines contain all kinds of elements. In the shrine "Object of Desire" lies a stone, covered with gold leaf, and a magnolia seed that I found at a cemetery. Some contain collections of found objects in combination with things that I bought in a store. Other shrines tell of journeys, relationships, or memories that I kept through souvenirs. It's about the "holding on" to the moment of a walk or a journey.

ME: That sounds like a continuous process. Is a sculpture ever really finished and done?

BR: No. As far as I'm concerned, a sculpture is never finished. Some pieces date back to a period of almost ten years. I find it interesting that some owners of my sculptures have inserted into them objects of their own. I have no problem with that. They have a personal relationship with my work this way.

ME: When I look at your "St. Sebastian" shrine (Fig.4), I see the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. This work deals, then, with a religious subject. At the same time this figure immediately reminds one of a Nkisi statue from the Congo as well. Has the aestheticization of African sculpture become the means for your form of expression?

BR: Yes, that's exactly right. In many of my sculptures one finds the mixing of cerebral attitudes and spiritual ideas.

ME: Some of your works are combinations of sculpture and painting, for example "The Silencing of Pantheos" (Fig.5). You bring together not only the objective, but the acoustic as well. You've assembled a very impressive collection of lamellophones. African music turns up in your installations and performances too. How do you describe sound in your art?

BR: I have used music in my performances, yes, but music played on lamellophones, I haven't yet incorporated that into my work. I think that that's my next step. Music – especially African music – is very important to me. As a concert organizer, I have worked with many African artists such as Sally Nyolo from Cameroon, Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mutukudzi from Zimbabwe and also with the Baobab Orchestra from Senegal. There's something essential about African music for the people who play it, and its meaning in their daily lives. African music, especially that of the griots in Mali, and the music of Senegal, passes on oral histories. I think it's often forgotten how large the influence of African music was and is on the entire music world. African sculpture has influenced modern art in the Western world in exactly the same way.

ME: You have said earlier that museums in America always place their African objects next to the Native American tribal art. Do you know of sculptures made in America by African slaves for their traditional use?

BR: At the time of my childhood that may have been the popular explanation, but I think that it's changed over the years. I believe that was part of the "primitive" categorization of non-white peoples. I'm not really sure whether sculpture as we know it was made then. I'm aware of the use of amulets and other protective objects. I believe small collections of ritual objects were found in

slave quarters. There certainly were small ritual objects made for Voodoo ceremonies, but I'm not sure whether these can be called sculptures.

ME: The creative process is like a ritual for you. What does ritual mean to you? What happens during your artistic process?

BR: Yes, that's true. I think it's not so different for other artists and musicians. Rituals help me to focus. They help me to shut out the chaos and remove me from daily events. There are many different processes and rituals that I go through before I work on an object. First, I have to have music: sometimes I play my Kalimba (lamellophone) or ngoni (a stringed instrument from Mali) for an hour before I begin. I can't work without this ritual. Then I put on some music, go through my pots and cans holding things that I soak in different fluids to achieve a certain patina or a certain hue: it's a little like alchemy. Then I start to make a little space on my workbench – I tend to work in organized chaos. I start by searching for objects to use, followed by a pause, in which I simply observe the object, and divide the collections into smaller collections. Some days I only make it to this step, other days I start to arrange the objects until it feels right. The next day starts again with music, clearing the workbench, organizing. I change around what I laid out the previous day, and the sculpture begins to grow. This can continue for days, months or even years. I usually work on several sculptures at once. So one object then serves as a springboard for another.

ME: What are you working on right now, and what are your current projects?

BR: At present I'm working on a series with figures which are smaller than 18 inches, and similar to my totem works in material and surface treatments. I'm also working on a series of paintings which I paint with pigments made from pollen and berry juices from my garden. The surface treatment that I developed is inspired by the "contemporary aging" of some African objects I came across this when someone offered me so-called old or ritually-used objects. I have seen documentation about how these pieces are artificially distressed. I liked the thought and energy, that was put into producing this "patina in the eye of the beholder". It's sometimes very difficult, especially for young collectors, to determine whether an object is actually old or new.