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Introduction to 'Fifth Estate' #306

David Watson

July 1981

"When I pronounce the word civilization, I spit."

—Gauguin

We are all trapped within the technological labyrinth, and at its center awaits our annihilation. We have already lost more than we can imagine to civilization's insatiable hunger for power and uniformity. We live in the shadow of an enormous edifice, a monstrosity which teeters and threatens to collapse upon us in a moment. We sing, make love, struggle and despair amid its decomposing limbs. But the smell of decomposition is general. We are in eclipse; the human spirit is moribund.

Urban civilization is a vast junkyard. Everything from the cells of our bodies to the planets is contaminated by its poisons and excreta. To resist it seems incoherent and hopeless. But the flaming trajectory of progress is what is truly mad, because its false optimism conceals a vicious cynicism and despair at the possibility of life. Realizing that all is lost, this consciousness surrenders to the

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momentum: after all, this is the Machine Age, and there is no room for human beings in a world of automata.

When we began this issue, frustrated with the lack of clarity which characterized the previous discussions, we had in mind to say something definitive about technology. We spent most of May and June in the library under fluorescent lights going through the endless literature on the subject. Besides being made vengefully aware of the contradictions involved in our activities, we learned that we were at least correct to trust our instincts and our visceral loathing for this technological desert and its obliteration of the human and natural universe. Everywhere we turned we found more horrors, more corruption, more decay and a greater urgency to somehow resist its conquest. Everything started to come under question, every commonplace of this civilization and its instruments, its way of life. If we learned that we could not necessarily foresee all of the implications of a geometrically expanding technological system, we *could* be certain about what it excluded from the realm of possibility: community, diversity, love and freedom, for starters. Just in the last few days, someone found a note in the newspapers that computer experts have coined the word “servoprotein” to refer to human beings such as programmers and technicians who work on the computers. This little bit of news demonstrates with frightening transparency that we will either recreate a natural and human world or perpetuate a world of machines which renders us superfluous by transforming us finally in “servoprotein.”

This is our challenge: to renew our humanity or lose it entirely to this behemoth which we have created and which has become the measure of all things. As E.M. Cioran has written, “... everything is virtue that leads us to live against the strain of our civilization, that invites us to compromise and sabotage its progress.” We will either find a way out of the technological wilderness or we will lose ourselves in it.