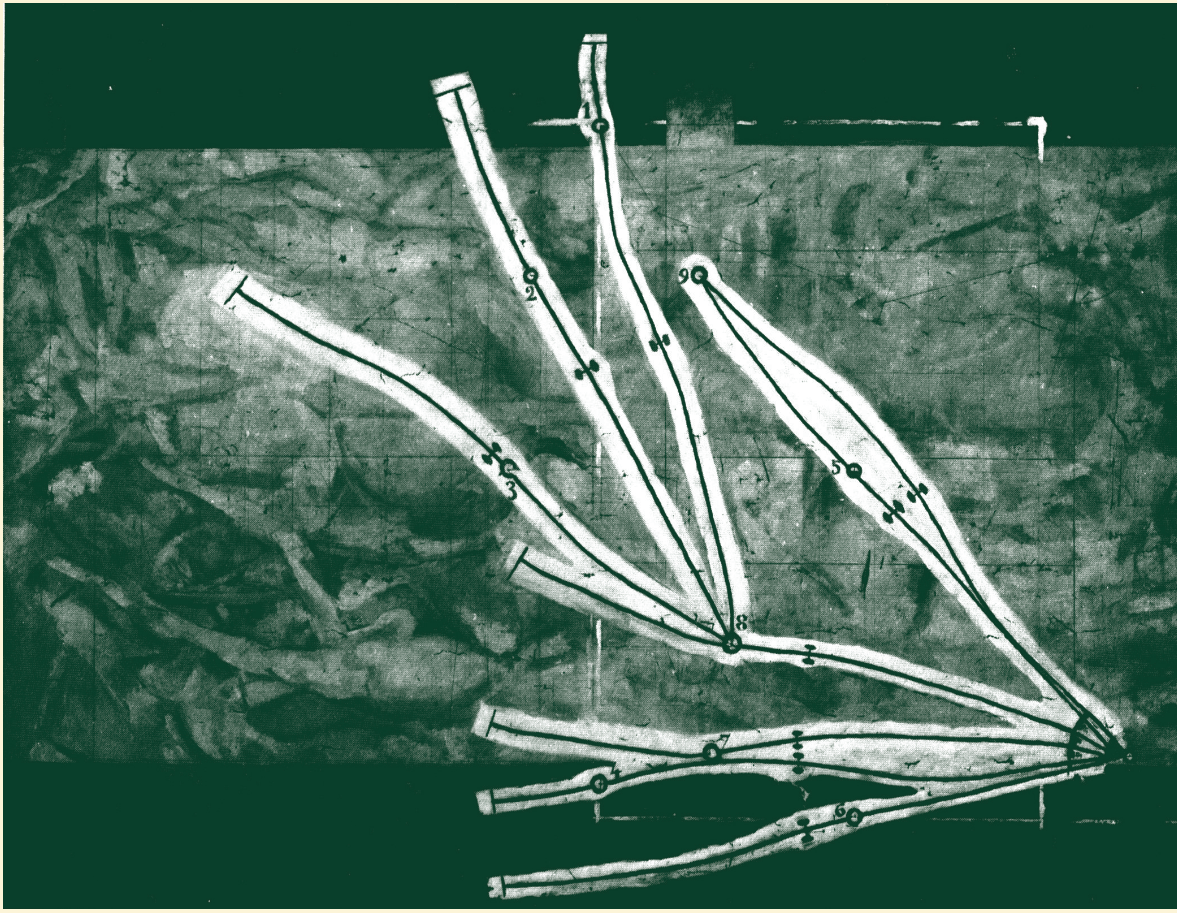
# ART AND AGENCY

## AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY



ALFRED GELL

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## *An Anthropological Theory*

Alfred Gell

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*To Simeran*
*with love*

# FOREWORD

## Nicholas Thomas

Alfred Gell, who died in January 1997, was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant social anthropologists of his generation. His writing and thought were rigorously analytical, yet often also playful and provocative; he was equally deft in engaging the most general issues of social theory, and the most intricate elements of rituals, practices, and artefacts. These capacities are exemplified in this book, which may amount to the most radical rethinking of the anthropology of art since that field of inquiry emerged. The book certainly combines a good deal of abstract model-making with remarkably insightful discussions of particular art objects and art styles.

Yet, despite it being written in a lucid and direct way, it is not necessarily an easy book to grasp. It does need to be acknowledged here that, had the author lived longer, he would certainly have done further work; he indeed left notes toward revisions that he did not have the time to carry out. What we have is the full draft of a book, most of which was written over a period of only a month, not an absolutely refined version. It should be added, though, that Alfred Gell's essays and books did, for the most part, emerge well formed; he wrote with great intensity, but preferred to write when his ideas were clearly worked out, from start to finish. The book can therefore be said to approximate an intended final form, but it does lack polishing, and there are certainly forceful passages that would have been qualified, points that would have added or elaborated, and sections that would have been better integrated with the whole, had Gell had the opportunity.

What the book lacks, in particular, is a preface or introduction proper, that concisely foreshadows its overall argument. While I hesitate to summarize another scholar's book, and am frankly unsure of my capacity to do justice to the various dimensions of a complex and involved argument, I believe that this is what this foreword should attempt, in order to make the arguments that follow more accessible, particularly to readers unfamiliar with Alfred Gell's other work. This book builds on a number of essays, and anthropologists who have read 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' (1992*b*), 'Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps' (1996), or Gell's study of Polynesian tattooing, *Wrapping in Images* (1993), will anticipate the directions that it takes.

The essay on 'The Technology of Enchantment', in particular, foreshadows some of the larger arguments here. In that paper, Gell provocatively claimed that the anthropology of art had got virtually nowhere thus far, because it had failed to dissociate itself from projects of aesthetic appreciation, that are to art as theology is to religion. He argued that if the discipline was instead to adopt the position analogous to that of the sociology of religion, it needed a methodological philistinism equivalent to sociology's methodological atheism. This required disowning the 'art cult' to which anthropologists, as cultured middle-class intellectuals, generally subscribe. This was not, however, to advocate a demystifying sociological analysis that would identify the role of art in sustaining class cultures, or in legitimizing dominant ideologies: Gell suggested that approaches of this kind failed to engage with art objects themselves, with their specificity and efficacy. More particularly, he was relatively uninterested in the questions raised by art world institutions, believing instead that the anthropology of art should address the workings of art in general.

He proposed that it was possible to address questions of the efficacy of the art object, without succumbing to the fascination and aura of those objects, by taking art as a special form of technology, and especially by regarding art objects as devices 'for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed' (1992*b*: 43). For example, brilliantly involuted and captivating forms such as those of Trobriand prowboards (of the Massim region, Papua New Guinea) work a kind of psychological warfare, in a situation of competitive exchange. These boards confront the hosts of exchange partners, ideally dazzle them, beguile them, and confuse them, leading them to surrender their valuables—anthropology's famous kula shells—for less than their value. The claim here is not reductive, however: it is not suggested that in some sense the object *by itself* does this, or would do it, independently of a field of expectations and understandings, which in this case envelope the artefact with magical prowess, which is known to have entered into its making. Technology is enchanting because it is enchanted, because it is the outcome of some process of barely comprehensible virtuosity, that exemplifies an ideal of magical efficacy that people struggle to realize in other domains.

There was a minor inconsistency in the 1992 article, in the sense that it seemed to be assumed that the anthropology of art remained the study of 'primitive' art (Gell rejected the euphemistic term 'non-Western' on the grounds that this included high Oriental art and other traditions, which clearly possessed an entirely different social location to the canonical tribal art forms). However, the examples he proceeded to use, in pointing to the 'halo effect of technical difficulty' and other aspects of the art objects, included the paintings of the American illusionist J. F. Peto, and Picasso. The implication that his theory might in fact be a theory of the workings of all art, rather than that supposedly characteristic of particular populations, is a premiss of the present book.

The first chapters amount to a dramatic elaboration of the arguments of the 1992 essay. Gell begins by deferring to the desirability, in broader cultural and political terms, of acknowledging the distinctness of non-Western aesthetic systems, but asserts that this cannot constitute an 'anthropological' theory, on the grounds that anthropological theories are essentially concerned with social relations, over the time-frame of biographies. As he acknowledges, this definitional orientation may be contentious, but it arguably provides a productive departure point for this particular inquiry. There are two linked arguments for a shift away from cross-cultural aesthetics. The first is that many canonical pieces of tribal art, such as the Asmat shields of south-west New Guinea, are plainly not intended to elicit 'aesthetic' appreciation in the conventional sense—they rather had a part to play in the deadly psychological warfare of headhunting, that was so fundamental to Asmat sociality before pacification. The second is a categorical rejection of the linguistic analogies that have been mobilized by so many semiotic and symbolic theories of art. And this is perhaps the sense in which this book is most radical. For many scholars, and indeed in much common-sense thinking about art, it is axiomatic that art is a matter of meaning and communication. This book suggests that it is instead about *doing*.

'Doing' is theorized as agency, as a process involving indexes and effects; the anthropology of art is constructed as a theory of agency, or of the mediation of agency by indexes, understood simply as material entities which motivate inferences, responses or interpretations. Indexes stand in a variety of relations to prototypes, artists, and recipients. Prototypes are the things that indices may represent or stand for, such as the person depicted in a portrait—though things may be 'represented' non-mimetically, and non-visually. Recipients are those whom indexes are taken to effect, or who may, in some cases, be effective themselves via the index (a view of a country estate commissioned by the landowner may be a vehicle of the recipient's self-celebrating agency, more than that of the artist. Artists are those who are considered to be immediately causally responsible for the existence and characteristics of index, but as we have just noted, they may be vehicles of the agency of others, not the self-subsistent, creative agents of Western commonsense ideas and art-world theory. In this respect, it is worth noting that despite the notable differences between the style and orientation of this book, and the Melanesianist deconstructionism of Marilyn Strathern (1988; see also Wagner 1992), Gell could be seen to fully embrace Strathern's notion of the 'partible' or 'distributed' person, and indeed to make explicit the ways in which it follows from this concept that actions and their effects are similarly not discrete expressions of individual will, but rather the outcomes of mediated practices in which agents and patients are implicated in complex ways. On the one hand the agency of the artist is rarely self-sufficient; on the other the index is not simply a 'product' or end-point of action, but rather a distributed extension of an agent. The chilling example of one of Pol Pot's soldiers, who distributes elements of his own efficacy in the form of landmines, is one of the many unexpected, yet apt instances that gives what would otherwise be an intractable, abstract exposition of these terms, some concreteness.

The theory receives more sustained exemplification in Chapters 6 and 7, which address forms of 'decorative' and 'representational' art respectively. The first discusses apotropaic patterns, involuted designs intended to entrance and ward off dangerous spirits; with examples such as the Asmat shield, these perhaps manifest most obviously one of the book's larger theses, namely that art objects mediate a technology to achieve certain ends, notably to enmesh patients in relations and intentionalities sought or prescribed by agents. Lest this appear a reductive approach to art, one that takes objects essentially as vehicles of strategies, it is important to emphasize that the formal complexity, and indeed the technical virtuosity, exhibited in works of art is not incidental to the argument but absolutely central to it. It is crucial to the theory, in fact, that indexes display 'a certain cognitive indecipherability', that they tantalize, they frustrate the viewer unable to recognize at once 'wholes and parts, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession'. Even though this book engages in little sustained cognitive theorizing, it is notable at this point and elsewhere that cognitive observations animate Gell's argument, to a degree that has become unusual in anthropology.

The long chapter which follows ranges widely over idolatry, sorcery, ritual, and personhood, and incidentally displays Gell's grasp of a bewildering range of south Asian and Polynesian source material, but is fully consistent with the claims of the previous sections. Idols are indeed of special relevance for the book, because they stand for an agent or patient (in the case of sorcery), for persons or deities, in manifest and powerful ways. They are indices that may be animated in a variety of ways, that enable transactions in lethal effect, fertility, auspiciousness, and the like. The particular forms of agency and intention at issue here, and the process of consecration, are explored in detail. The larger point is that there are multiple implications of agency in objects, 'an inseparable transition' between them and actual human agents. Once appreciated as indexes of agency, iconic objects in particular can occupy positions in the networks of human social agency that are almost equivalent to the positions of humans themselves.

Up to this point, Gell's theorizing and exemplification have focused upon the work of particular objects or indexes in particular actions, on specific processes rather than entire repertoires of artworks. He concludes Chapter 7 by acknowledging that there are many vital respects in which artworks do not appear as singular entities, but rather as ensembles. The remainder of the book appears to take a sharp turn away from the paradigm of the agent and index that has received such concerted attention thus far. It tackles the question of familial relations among artworks, and seems to shift back to conventional ground, in engaging with the concept of style. Yet this discussion, which proceeds via a rich formal analysis of the extraordinary corpus of Marquesan art documented by the German ethnologist Karl von den Steinen, is in the end consistent with what comes before.

Gell is again concerned to avoid linguistic models such as 'a grammar of style' and instead seeks rather to identify axes of coherence through a strictly formal analysis of generative relations among motifs. The bulk of the chapter consists of a richly visual analysis of these relations. The point that Janus figures (which are almost pervasive in Oceanic art) indexed invulnerability had already been made in *Wrapping in Images*; it was not simply that the figure could see in all directions, but that the face was itself an expression of power, and, in sculptural form, was canonically the face of a deity rather than a human. One of the central claims of *Wrapping in Images* was that eastern Polynesian tattooing was a technology that reinforced the body, and in the highly competitive, unstable, and violent societies of the Marquesas, it is not unexpected to find that tattooing entailed the multiplication of the body's faces. These themes are highly salient to Gell's discussion of Marquesan forms such as the famous *u'u* clubs, described here as 'the ultimate double-double tiki', but the chapter goes well beyond the earlier discussions of the arts of empowerment in these societies. The real object, in this case, is the diagnosis of the formal principles that give Marquesan art its singularity, and these are identified, not at the level of appearance, but through the types of transformations that link Marquesan artworks.

At the most abstract level, the principles that govern these transformations can be connected to the cultural milieu. Gell suggests that the most basic principle to be detected in the Marquesan corpus is a principle of 'least difference': 'the forms taken by motifs and figures are the ones involving the least modification of neighbouring motifs consistent with the establishment of a distinction between them.' This trend can in turn, he claims, be connected with the most basic feature of identity-formation in Marquesan society, which was characterized by acute status competition; this was not simply a matter of political jockeying, but rather a ritually saturated process of inter-individual contact and commensality. Personal integrity was continually threatened by dispersal and de-differentiation; many Marquesan artefacts amounted, individually, to devices that wrapped the body and protected particular orifices, or the body as a whole in situations of crisis; in the ensemble as a whole, the principle of least difference resonated with a preoccupation with a continually prejudiced effort of differentiation, of differentiation in the midst of dissolution. 'There was an elective affinity between a *modus operandi* in the artefactual domain, which generated motifs from other motifs by interpolating minuscule variations, and a *modus operandi* in the social realm which created "differences" arbitrarily against a background of fusional sameness.'

It is worth underlining the distinction between this effort and that of Allan Hanson, which Gell finds, in an opening section of the chapter, to be worthy but misconceived. Whereas Hanson attempted to identify one-to-one correspondences between formal properties in Maori art (such as disrupted symmetry) and properties of Maori culture (competitive reciprocity), Gell points out that the stylistic elements that are singled out are universal, or at least commonly encountered, and cannot therefore be determined by singular features of Maori culture. Although the 'elective affinity' that he seeks to identify between Marquesan style and culture could be seen to be similar to the relation of recapitulation that Hanson postulated between Maori aesthetic form and culture, for Gell the affinities will emerge not at the level of characteristic relations in particular bodies of material but at that of 'relations between relations'; at the level, in other words, of meta-properties that demonstrably render that style peculiar to itself.

The final chapter makes a further, equally ambitious step, on to ground that has often been unsatisfactorily traversed, the problem that has been conventionally posed in terms of what collective counterparts individual minds and consciousnesses possess. Gell's approach to the issue may be fresh and rewarding precisely because it does not start from the usual departure points, but rather builds on several preceding arguments—'inner' and 'outer', internal and external, have already been shown to be relatively rather than absolutely contrasted. Inspired by Peer Gynt's onion, by Strathern's fractal conception of personhood, and by the extraordinary exemplification of fractal and distributed personhood in Polynesian and especially Marquesan art, Gell evokes the notion of a 'distributed mind' through an argument that 'the structures of art history demonstrate an externalized and collectivized cognitive process.' The famous Malangan of New Ireland and the Kula transactions of the Massim region of Papua New Guinea are invoked to advance this argument, demonstrating, with the support of the work of Nancy Munn in particular, that the Kula operator 'is a spatio-temporally extended person'. At this point two of the book's key themes, that of the distributed mind, and that of efficacious agency—upon which so much emphasis is placed in the opening sections of the book—are drawn together. Efficacy is founded on a comprehensive internal model of the outside field. One becomes a great Kula operator, in other words, by modelling a working simulacrum, a dynamic space-time map, of the play and history of Kula in the world. Internal mental process and external transactions in objectified personhood are (ideally) fused. Mind, therefore, can exist objectively as well as subjectively, as a pattern of transactable objects.

Gell does not conclude with this large claim, but proceeds to vindicate the concept of the distributed mind through the more familiar instance of the individual (canonically Western) artist's work, turning also to engage with questions of continuity over time, and foreshadowing the concluding discussion of questions of tradition. His key terms here are 'protention' and 'retention', which advert to the ways artworks at once anticipate future works and hark back to others. His key example is the *œuvre* of Duchamp, and particularly the very striking notion of 'the network of stoppages' which inspired not only Gell's understanding of the issue, but the diagrammatic form in which he presents it. The final section of the book reverts to the collective register, arguing that a similar pattern of protentions and retentions can be identified in the history of Maori meeting houses, therefore understanding this historical corpus as 'a distributed object structurally isomorphous to consciousness as a temporal process'. There are many incidental accomplishments of this discussion, such as the demonstration of the extent to which 'fractal personhood', a concept fashioned and largely isolated within Melanesianist anthropology, possesses great salience beyond it.

This is a demanding book. The range of the examples that are discussed in detail is quite breath-taking, as is the ensemble of big conceptual questions that are tackled. It will inevitably be contentious: many anthropologists of art have exhibited great virtuosity in semiotic interpretations, and will no doubt remain unpersuaded that an approach which eschews linguistic analogies and concepts can represent an advance on their own. Regional specialists, such as Polynesianists, may be taken aback by the unexpected character of Gell's way of seeing. Yet the fertility of his provocation cannot be questioned. His specific claims concerning Oceanic and other materials give specialists a chance to move beyond the interpretations, too often bland interpretations, that have assumed the status of received wisdom; while the unprecedented effort to theorize fundamental questions of personhood and cognition from the vantage point of a theory of art may be as destabilizing and suggestive for the former as for the latter. Friends and colleagues remain painfully conscious of our lost opportunities to debate the issues further with Alfred in person; yet he has left us with a distributed element of his own personhood, an index of his own creative virtuosity, a gift.

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This book chronicles a momentous and sad time for the many people who loved and admired Alfred, and a cataclysmic one for me and my son Rohan, and for Alfred's parents. Alfred began the final chapter directly upon receiving confirmation of an incurable condition; in the weeks that followed he devoted considerable time towards giving clear instructions concerning its posthumous publication. He had absolute confidence in Peter Momtchiloff of Oxford University Press, with whom he had previously liaised. It gives me pleasure to record that this confidence was amply justified in the months following Alfred's death just three days after the posting of the manuscript. With the exception of two illustrations pertaining to Chapter 8 the book appears in the form in which Alfred left it. It amounts to a first draft written during an intense three-week period over the Easter vacation of 1996. Alfred intended to draw with his own hand many of the photographic illustrations and had begun to make notes towards the revision of the manuscript shortly before he was taken ill. Blessed with implacable contentment and good humour, he was pleased and grateful for being granted time enough in which to squeeze completion of a book on art—the subject that truly gripped and delighted him—and was satisfied with the final product.

It must be made clear that the people listed herein were collaborators whose commitment to ensuring the book's smooth publication, while different in nature from mine, arose out of a direct personal involvement with Alfred. Stephen and Christine Hugh-Jones had been at school with Alfred. Stephen devoted many hours of his time to scanning the illustrations so that the manuscript could be sent to the publishers while Alfred was alive. He combined this with keeping a watchful, solicitous eye over Rohan and, in common with Christine, with providing Alfred with an openly affectionate companionship during his last weeks. Alfred, never at a loss to respond verbally, was significantly silent when it came to his notice that Stephen was putting in so much work. Nicholas Thomas and Alfred had enjoyed a mutually stimulating intellectual partnership that evolved into a close friendship over many years: it would be fair to say that he has taken as active a role as mine in all matters relating to the publication process. Chris Pinney gave constant moral and intellectual support and Michael O'Hanlon arranged for permissions in relation to the illustrations held at the British Museum. Other friends of Alfred's and mine, namely Don Gardner, Carrie Humphrey, Eric Hirsch, Marilyn Strathern, Suzanne Küchler, and Howard Morphy, attended to various queries that came up in the course of publication. Susan Gell, Alfred's mother, and Trudi Binns redrew some of the illustrations from rough sketches of Alfred's.

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SIMERAN GELL

*Cambridge, 1998*

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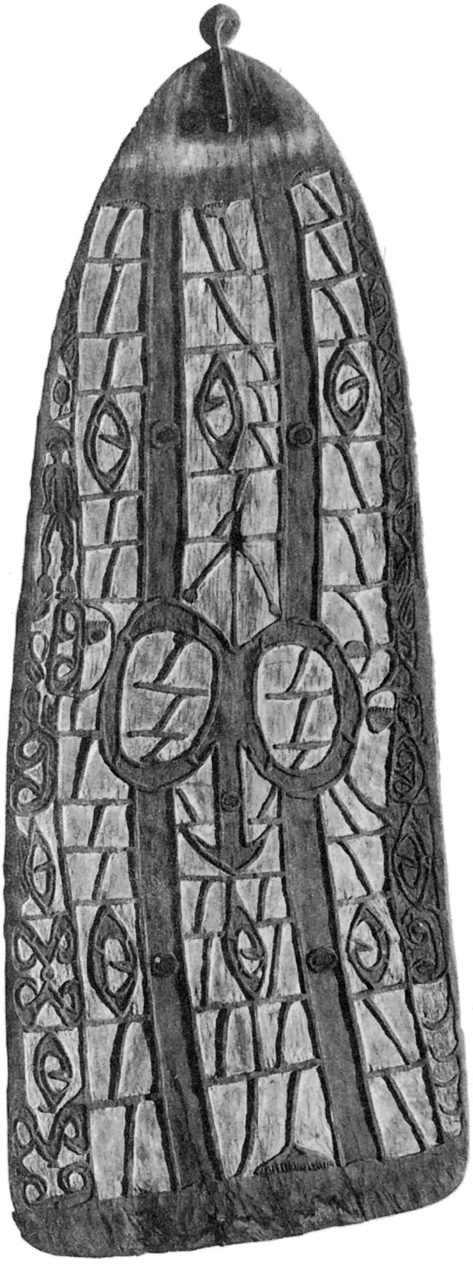

Asmat shield. *Source*: Rijk Museum voor Volkenkunde (RMV 1854–446)

# 1

# The Problem Defined: The Need for an Anthropology of Art

## 1.1. *Can there be an Anthropological Theory of Visual Art?*

An 'anthropological theory of visual art' probably suggests a theory dealing with the art production in the colonial and post-colonial societies anthropologists typically study, plus the so-called 'Primitive' art—now usually called 'ethnographic' art—in museum collections. The 'anthropological theory of art' equals the 'theory of art' applied to 'anthropological' art. But this is not what I have in mind. The art of the colonial and post-colonial margins, inasmuch as it is 'art', can be approached via any, or all, of the existing 'theories of art', in so far as these approaches are useful ones. Critics, philosophers, and aestheticians have been busy for a long time; 'theories of art' constitute a vast and well-established field. Those whose profession it is to describe and understand the art of Picasso and Brancusi can write about masks from Africa as 'art', and indeed need to do so because of the very salient art-historical relationships between the art of Africa and twentieth-century Western art. There is no sense in developing one 'theory of art' for our own art, and another, distinctively different theory, for the art of those cultures who happened, once upon a time, to fall under the sway of colonialism. If Western (aesthetic) theories of art apply to 'our' art, then they apply to everybody's art, and should be so applied.

Sally Price (1989) has rightly complained about the essentialization and concomitant ghettoization of so-called 'Primitive' art. She argues that this art deserves to be evaluated by Western spectators according to the same critical standards we apply to our own art. Art from non-Western cultures is not essentially different from our own, in that it is produced by individual, talented, imaginative artists, who ought to be accorded the same degree of recognition as Western artists, rather than being viewed either as 'instinctive' children of nature, spontaneously expressing their primitive urges, or, alternatively, as slavish exponents of some rigid 'tribal' style. Like other contemporary writers on the subject of ethnographic arts (Coote 1992, 1996; Morphy 1994, 1996), Price believes that each culture has a culture-specific aesthetic, and the task of the anthropology of art is to define the characteristics of each culture's inherent aesthetic, so that the aesthetic contributions of particular non-Western artists can be evaluated correctly, that is, in relation to their culturally specific aesthetic intentions. Here is her credo:

> The crux of the problem, as I understand it, is that the appreciation of Primitive Art has nearly always been phrased in terms of a fallacious choice: one option is to let the aesthetically discriminating eye be our guide on the basis of some undefined concept of universal beauty. The other is to bury ourselves in 'tribal lore' to discover the utilitarian or ritual function of the objects in question. These two routes are generally viewed as competitive and incompatible . . . I would propose the possibility of a third conceptualization that sits somewhere between the two extremes . . . It requires the acceptance of two tenets that do not as yet enjoy widespread acceptance among educated members of Western societies.
>
> —One tenet is that the 'eye' of even the most naturally gifted connoisseur is not naked, but views art through the lense of a Western cultural education.
>
> —The second is that many Primitives (including both artists and critics) are also endowed with a discriminating 'eye'—similarly fitted with an optical device that reflects their own cultural education.
>
> In the framework of these two tenets, anthropological contextualization represents, not a tedious elaboration of exotic customs that competes with true 'aesthetic experience,' but rather a means to expand the aesthetic experience beyond our own narrowly culture-bound line of vision. Having accepted works of Primitive Art as worthy of representation alongside the works of our own societies' most distinguished artists . . . our next task is to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of the aesthetic frameworks within which they were produced. (Price 1989: 92–3)

This view is perfectly consistent with the close relationship between art history and the theory of art in the West. There is an obvious analogy between 'culture-specific aesthetics' and 'period-specific aesthetics'. Art theorists such as Baxendall (1972) have shown that the reception of the art of particular periods in the history of Western art was dependent on how the art was 'seen' at the time, and that 'ways of seeing' change over time. To appreciate the art of a particular period we should try to recapture the 'way of seeing' which artists of the period implicitly assumed their public would bring to their work. One of the art historian's tasks is to assist in this process by adducing the historical context. The anthropology of art, one might quite reasonably conclude, has an approximately similar objective, except that it is the 'way of seeing' of a cultural system, rather than a historical period, which has to be elucidated.

I have no objection to Price's suggestions so far as increasing the recognition afforded to non-Western art and artists is concerned. Indeed what well-intentioned person could object to such a programme, except possibly the 'connoisseurs', who derive a reactionary satisfaction from imagining that the producers of the 'primitive art' they like to collect are primeval savages, barely descended from the trees. These idiots can be dismissed out of hand.

All the same, I do not think that the elucidation of *non-western aesthetic systems* constitutes an 'anthropology' of art. Firstly, such a programme is exclusively cultural, rather than social. Anthropology, from my point of view, is a social science discipline, not a humanity. The distinction is, I admit, elusive, but it does imply that the 'anthropology of art' focuses on the social context of art production, circulation, and reception, rather than the evaluation of particular works of art, which, to my mind, is the function of a critic. It may be interesting to know why, for example, the Yoruba evaluate one carving as aesthetically superior to another (R. F. Thompson 1973), but that does not tell us much about why the Yoruba carve to begin with. The presence of large numbers of carvings, carvers, and critics of carvings in Yorubaland at a certain period in time is a social fact whose explanation does not lie in the domain of indigenous aesthetics. Similarly, our aesthetic preferences cannot by themselves account for the existence of the objects which we assemble in museums and regard aesthetically. Aesthetic judgements are only interior mental acts; art objects, on the other hand, are produced and circulated in the external physical and social world. This production and circulation has to be sustained by certain social processes of an objective kind, which are connected to other social processes (exchange, politics, religion, kinship, etc.). Unless, for instance, there were secret societies such as Poro and Sande in West Africa, there would be no Poro and Sande masks. Poro and Sande masks can be regarded and evaluated aesthetically, by ourselves, or by the indigenous art public, only because of the presence of certain social institutions in that region. Even if one were to concede that something akin to 'aesthetics' exists as a feature of the ideational system of every culture, one would be far from possessing a theory which could account for the production and circulation of particular works of art in particular social milieux. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (Gell 1995), I am far from convinced that every 'culture' has a component of its ideational system which is comparable to our own 'aesthetics'. I think that the desire to see the art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans, than it does about these other cultures. The project of 'indigenous aesthetics' is essentially geared to refining and expanding the aesthetic sensitivities of the Western art public by providing a cultural context within which non-Western art objects can be assimilated to the categories of Western aesthetic art-appreciation. This is not a bad thing in itself, but it still falls far short of being an anthropological theory of art production and circulation.

I say this for reasons that are unaffected by the correctness or otherwise of my views about the impossibility of using 'aesthetics' as a universal parameter of cultural description and comparison. Even if, as Price, Coote, Morphy, and others suppose, all cultures have an 'aesthetic', descriptive accounts of other cultures' aesthetics would not add up to an anthropological theory. Distinctively 'anthropological' theories have certain defining characteristics, which these accounts of evaluative schemes would lack. Evaluative schemes, of whatever kind, are only of anthropological interest in so far as they play a part within social processes of interaction, through which they are generated and sustained.

The anthropology of law, for instance, is not the study of legal–ethical principles—other peoples' ideas of right and wrong—but of disputes and their resolution, in the course of which disputants do often appeal to such principles. Similarly, the anthropology of art cannot be the study of the aesthetic principles of this or that culture, but of the mobilization of aesthetic principles (or something like them) in the course of social interaction. The aesthetic theory of art just does not resemble, in any salient respect, any existing anthropological theory about social processes. What it resembles is existing Western art theory—which of course it is, applied no longer to 'Western' art, but to exotic or popular art. To develop a distinctively anthropological theory of art it is insufficient to 'borrow' existing art theory and apply it to a new object; one must develop a new variant of *existing anthropological theory*, and apply it to art. It is not that I want to be more original than my colleagues who have applied the existing theory of art to exotic objects, I just want to be unoriginal in a new way. 'Existing anthropological theories' are not about art; they are about topics like kinship, subsistence economics, gender, religion, and the like. The objective, therefore, is to create a theory about art which is anthropological because it resembles these other theories that one can confidently describe as anthropological. Of course, this imitative strategy very much depends on what sort of a subject one considers anthropology to be; and how this subject differs from neighbouring ones.

What constitutes the defining characteristic of 'anthropological theories', as a class, and what grounds have I for asserting that codifying aesthetic-evaluative schemes would not fall under such a rubric? My view is that in so far as anthropology has a specific subject-matter at all, that subject-matter is 'social relationships'—relationships between participants in social systems of various kinds. I recognize that many anthropologists in the tradition of Boas and Kroeber, Price among them, consider that the subject-matter of anthropology is 'culture'. The problem with this formulation is that one only discovers what anybody's 'culture' consists of by observing and recording their cultural behaviour in some specific setting, that is, how they relate to specific 'others' in social interactions. Culture has no existence independently of its manifestations in social interactions; this is true even if one sits someone down and asks them to 'tell us about your culture'—in this case the interaction in question is the one between the inquiring anthropologist and the (probably rather bemused) informant.

The problem with the 'indigenous aesthetics' programme, in my view, is that it tends to reify the 'aesthetic response' independently of the social context of its manifestations (and that Boasian anthropology in general reifies culture). In so far as there can be an anthropological theory of 'aesthetics', such a theory would try to explain why social agents, in particular settings, produce the responses that they do to particular works of art. I think that this can be distinguished from the laudable, but essentially non-anthropological task of