

Art's Agency and Art History

Edited by
Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner



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New Interventions in Art History

Series editor: Dana Arnold, *University of Southampton*

New Interventions in Art History is a series of textbook mini-companions – published in connection with the Association of Art Historians – that aims to provide innovative approaches to, and new perspectives on, the study of art history. Each volume focuses on a specific area of the discipline of art history – here used in the broadest sense to include painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic arts, and film – and aims to identify the key factors that have shaped the artistic phenomenon under scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the social and political context and the historiography of the artistic cultures or movements under review. In this way, the essays that comprise each volume cohere around the central theme while providing insights into the broader problematics of a given historical moment.

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Series Editor's Preface

New Interventions in Art History was established to provide a forum for innovative approaches to and perspectives on the study of art history in all its complexities. *Art's Agency and Art History* takes Alfred Gell's posthumously published work *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (1998) and provides a series of critical interventions which carry the significance of the subject well beyond Gell's immediate anthropological readership. The volume brings together essays from leading academics working across a wide geographical and chronological span to offer an authoritative and innovative consideration of the ways in which arguably one of the most important pieces of "theory" published in recent decades relates to art history in its broadest constituency. Indeed, the chapters combine to take up the challenge to traditional disciplinary boundaries between the anthropology of art and art history that is implicitly offered by Gell.

The volume offers ways of thinking through the complex and sometimes difficult theoretical and methodological issues Gell's work raises that will be particularly useful for students working in art history and related fields such as archaeology and classics. Gell aims to replace the emphasis on aesthetics and the communication of meaning with a concentration on the "material agency" of art which is evident in processes of social interaction. In order to do this, Gell proposes a set of concepts which touch on almost every aspect of art production and reception, from issues of representation to artistic creativity, artist-patron relationships, and the social effectiveness of art. In the introductory chapter of *Art's Agency and Art History*, the editors position Gell's theory in relationship to key methodological and theoretical approaches in the critical tradition of art history, as well as to more recent sociological and semiotic approaches. The remaining chapters offer not only case-studies of how these ideas

work to inform a fresh understanding of art, but also significant new interpretations in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, art history, classics, Egyptology, Near Eastern studies, oriental studies, and pre-Columbian studies. The volume thus makes a welcome addition to a series that seeks to offer a theoretically informed transdisciplinary analysis of issues that are important for our understanding of the visual world.

Dana Arnold
London 2006

Preface

This volume originated in a panel organized by Robin Osborne at the Oxford meeting of the Theoretical Archaeology Group in December 2000. The eventual transformation of that panel into this book was dependent upon the enthusiasm of Dana Arnold and Jeremy Tanner. An informal day conference, involving most of the participants here, held in King's College, Cambridge in summer 2003 usefully moved the project toward this fruition.

The premise of the original panel was that Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* deserved to be better known among archaeologists since, whether or not one liked the particular approach taken by Gell, the questions which he posed more sharply than anyone before – questions about art's agency but also about what makes an artwork distinct – were ones which archaeologists ignored at their peril. The premise of this book is that those same questions are urgent also for the art historian, and that disciplinary division between anthropology, archaeology, art history, classics, Egyptology, Near Eastern Studies, Oriental Studies, Pre-Columbian Studies, etc. has impeded dialogue over questions of great mutual interest – and questions which are most usefully illuminated by the very different sorts of materials which scholars in those disciplines have variously at their disposal.

Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner
June 2006

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Introduction: *Art and Agency* and Art History

Jeremy Tanner and Robin Osborne

Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* is a strikingly original intervention in the anthropology of art, and also a controversial one. It has been celebrated, elaborated, and fiercely criticized.¹ Gell's treatise is of immediate interest to art historians. He breaks out of the restricted interest in "tribal" or "primitive" art characteristic of the preponderance of work in the anthropology of art, and offers a theory of art which is anthropological in the broader sense, namely one which can equally effectively analyze either a West African nail fetish or Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*. For Gell all these are objects which act as agents, through which we are able to grasp "mind" as an external disposition transcending the individual. Gell's theory is as provocative as it is wide-ranging and stimulating: what kind of understanding of art is possible when one rejects "meaning" and "aesthetics" as proper objects of analysis? But it is one which should not be ignored: Gell's theory of art not only offers a new way of looking at art, but also provides a genealogy of art history, suggesting that it is just a minor variant transformation of underlying cognitive dispositions shared with fetishists and idolaters from the Congo to Kathmandu.²

In this introduction, we first outline the key themes of Gell's program ("*Art and Agency: The Program*"). We explore their background in recent debates in anthropology and their resonances with strands of critical theory in art history ("*Art and Agency* between Art History and Anthropology"). We then describe in more detail the core of Gell's analytical apparatus, his "art nexus," which embodies the most important elements of Gell's theoretical contribution to the history and anthropology of art

(“From the Art Nexus to the Gellogram”). This provides essential background to the varied appropriations, elaborations and critiques of Gell offered in the chapters which form the substance of this volume, ranging from ancient Egypt to early-modern England, from imperial China to pre-Columbian Peru, which we briefly introduce (“*Art and Agency in Art History*”).

Art and Agency: The Program

Art and Agency is a polemical work. Gell defines his intellectual program in part by attacking conventional anthropological (and art-historical) approaches. In an earlier paper, Gell had already advocated “a complete break with aesthetics.”³ In *Art and Agency* he further argues that conventional art-historical approaches cater primarily to the aesthetic sensitivities of a Western art public, and assimilate the kinds of experiences entailed in the encounter with African or Oceanic art to that of the museum-going art lover in the West – all at the expense of meaningful sociological understanding of how the artwork circulates, and produces effects, in its original setting. He also criticizes iconographic approaches to art, for their exclusively cultural focus on meaning and symbolic communication, an approach derived from Panofsky,⁴ but also highly influential in the anthropology of art, in particular through the work of Anthony Forge.⁵ Culture, Gell suggests, is not the proper frame within which to contextualize art, since culture is merely an “abstraction” in contrast to “the dynamics of social interaction . . . a real process . . . unfolding in time.”⁶

Instead of the traditional focus on aesthetics and meaning, Gell chooses to “place all the emphasis on *agency, causation, result and transformation,*” viewing “art as a system of action intended to change the world, rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”⁷ All social agency, Gell argues, is realized through the medium of objects. Humans realize their intentions, and thus exercise agency, through the medium of artifacts as “secondary agents” which distribute their agency in the causal milieu.⁸ A soldier is only a soldier by virtue of the weapons which make possible his capacity for violence: Gell cites the example of Pol Pot’s soldiers scattering landmines in Cambodia, objects which were constitutive of their agency, their capacity to inflict violence on a spatially and temporally expanded scale. Artworks differ from other artifacts, such as landmines, in the manner of their agency. Artworks are “indexes” which distribute agency

by calling forth on the part of the viewer or “recipient” an “abduction” or inference of their origins in an act of manufacture. The visual properties of the index, in particular their visual complexity or technical virtuosity, realize the agency of their producer (whether the artist or the patron who commands his services) through the impact they have on the viewer or “patient,” inferring and experiencing the primary agent’s potency at one and the same time. The canoe prow-boards of Trobriand Islanders (figure 0.1), richly decorated with circles painted in bright colors with strong tonal contrasts, were weapons in the psychological warfare which was one component of kula-exchange. Overcome with awe at the magical powers inferred to be at the disposal of the canoe-owner by virtue of the captivating power of the prow-decoration, the viewers of such imagery were expected to lose hold of their normal wits, and trade their kula-shells at less than their true value. Likewise, the decoration on the Asmat shield, which forms the frontispiece to *Art and Agency*, was designed not to elicit aesthetic interest, except in the most elliptical understanding of the term, but rather to instill fear on the part of the opposing warrior, similarly to the terrifying gorgoneion, which was a popular device on the shields of ancient Greek hoplites.⁹ In these works of art, “beauty” and the decoding of “symbolic meaning” are not much at issue.¹⁰

Art and Agency between Art History and Anthropology

Gell’s statement of his program needs to be seen against the background of dominant trends in anthropological theory and the anthropology of art against which he was reacting. Once placed in this context, it can be shown to have significant features in common with some of the more significant recent critical interventions in mainstream art history. Gell offers such strands of art-historical theory a potentially robust foundation in contemporary cognitive psychology, as well as a rigorous formalization in models designed to facilitate comparative historical and cross-cultural analysis.

Gell’s polemics are strongly shaped by developments interior to the anthropology of art. He is particularly concerned to distance himself from “the slightest imputation that art is ‘like language’,” communicating symbolic meanings on the basis of language-like components.¹¹ This concern is founded in a reaction against the structuralist anthropology of the 1970s, in which art was analyzed on the basis of linguistic



Figure 0.1 Trobriand canoe prow-board, courtesy of Dr. Shirley Campbell.

models. Scholars like Faris made extensive use of linguistic analogy in decomposing systems of artistic design, such as Nuba body art, into basic elements (visual forms such as circles, zigzags etc) which could be combined according to phase-structure rules, to produce “well-formed” utterances or representations, such as “poisonous snake.”¹² Gell, who worked extensively on body-art,¹³ objects to these “visual grammars” on the ground that such sets of visual forms do not share the structural properties of languages – for example arbitrary and diacritical relations between their base components, and a structured hierarchy of levels from phonemes through morphemes to syntax.¹⁴ Such approaches, Gell argues, elide both the social features of artworks as components in networks of social relations, and their specifically visual characteristics as presenting objects, characteristics grounded in highly specific material technologies of production.¹⁵

These criticisms are relevant also to the semiotic turn in art history. Gell makes no allusion to the work of such art historians as Norman Bryson or Mieke Bal, whose use of the analogy between language and art is rather differently conceived from that of the anthropologists with whose work Gell is concerned, and who apply the modes of analysis of the literary critic as well as those of Jakobsonian linguistics.¹⁶ Such work itself raises issues relating to its elision of the technologies and the social relations of production similar to those raised by anthropological work based in the language model. Bryson himself noted that applying the Saussurean conception of the sign uncritically left the critic in danger of ending up with “a perspective in which the meaning of the sign is defined entirely by formal means, as the product of oppositions among signs within an enclosed system.”¹⁷ He acknowledged that his own *Tradition and Desire: from David to Delacroix* was “an analysis of what painting can become in the hands of those who both fear and desire that the meaning of a painting is, always, another painting.”¹⁸ And yet Gell’s claims, although expressed in distinctly different language, run remarkably parallel to the case Bryson makes that “A virtue of considering the visual image as sign is that having relocated painting within the social domain, inherently and not only as a result of the instrumental placing there by some other agency, it becomes possible to think of the image as discursive work which returns into society.”¹⁹ We should not too readily, therefore, assume that Gell’s critique of linguistic models should be taken to distance him from all aspects of the “linguistic turn” that has so marked post-structuralist and post-processualist work.

Gell's strictures concerning aestheticism also have a very specific anthropological target, namely the contemporary program in anthropological aesthetics developed by Howard Morphy, Jeremy Coote, and Anthony Shelton, but raise issues that reach well beyond anthropology. Coote and his colleagues specifically de-emphasize the art object as a focus of interest in favor of a more abstract focus on "valued formal properties of perception" characteristic of cultures, and specifically criticize attempts in the early anthropology of art to "relate aesthetics to social organisation or social structure."²⁰ Coote argues that although the Dinka in southern Sudan do not have any tradition of manufacturing art objects, they do have a rich aesthetic experience, largely based in making metaphorical connections between their visual experience of cattle – their color configurations and other bodily forms, such as horn-shapes, patterns of movement – and wider aspects of experience. The anthropology of art, Coote suggests, should be concerned with identifying the set of formal qualities recognized and valued within a society, and the repertoire of visual skills through which they are instantiated. Art historians will recognize the influence of the early work of Michael Baxandall devoted to understanding fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian painting in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century terms.²¹ Gell objects that in seeking to abstract such a cultural aesthetic, Coote unwittingly assimilates Dinka aesthetic orientations to modern conceptions of aesthetic disinterestedness, developed in the philosophy of Kant.²² This ignores the social basis which gives life to the visual preoccupations identified by Coote. To understand why Dinka have these "aesthetic" interests in oxen, Gell argues, one must explore the role of oxen as "mediating elements in social praxis."²³ Far from being disinterested, the Dinka appreciation and celebration of oxen is linked to the status ambitions of the youths who care for them and celebrate them. "What makes oxen 'aesthetic' is the role they play in locally dominant forms of competition."²⁴ For Gell the aesthetic is of interest only when its social agency is considered.

Notwithstanding his strictures, Gell does invoke both aesthetics and symbolic communication in the course of his analysis, but in a way which at least in principle is integrated with his emphasis on the primacy of social agency and perceptual cognition, rather than culture and symbolic meaning. While he is not interested in the analytics of beauty – "pure aesthetics" in the sense of Kant's third Critique – Gell is very much concerned with "transcendental aesthetics" on the model of Kant's first Critique, which explores "how the human sensory capacity construes and

gives form to stimuli.”²⁵ The exclusion of purely symbolic bases for artistic effects puts the spotlight upon exactly how those effects are achieved. In Gell the alternative to the purely symbolic sometimes seems to be some kind of transcendental aesthetics, universal perceptual-cognitive bases for visual response, by virtue of which the abductions from indexes with which he is concerned have the “causal” character his theory asserts.

Decorative motifs, which do not refer to or represent anything beyond themselves, provide a particularly favorable ground for developing his line of argument. In the sixth chapter of *Art and Agency*, “The critique of the index,” Gell argues that the patterns of decorative art have an intrinsic liveliness by virtue of the interrelationships between neighboring motifs. Four planar transformations – reflection, translation, rotation and glide-reflection – operating on constituent motifs form the basis of all patterns, and generate relationships of such complexity that they are indecipherable, thus slowing perceptual scanning of the entranced viewer, trapped in an interminable exchange with the decorated object. Apotropaic patterns, like Celtic knotwork and labyrinths, exemplify this “sticky” character of decorative patterns to a particularly marked degree. They thus lend themselves to protecting thresholds, both of buildings and, as tattoos, of orifices of the body: demons fascinated by the patterns get stuck, like insects on fly paper, and are thus diverted from acts of malevolence. Further, it is probably these perceptual qualities which explain the use of representations of one type of apotropaic pattern, the labyrinth, in contexts of transition between the worlds of the living and the dead as far apart in time and place as the passage grave at New Grange in Ireland and the tattooed bodies of the dead in the New Hebrides.²⁶ Of course, these motifs may also permit abductions of symbolic themes, specific to particular cultures, but these bear a family relationship to each other by virtue of the fundamental cognitive indecipherability which is the basis on which such labyrinthine patterns exercise their characteristic agency.

In practice, Gell recognizes that symbolic meanings and modes of communication are also crucial to art, and he is indeed an accomplished exponent of iconographic method. The eighth chapter of *Art and Agency* is an extended analysis of style in the art of the Marquesan Islands in Polynesia, particularly tattooing. Gell focuses on one particular motif, the *etua*, and shows how it can be transformed into numerous other motifs according to principles of production homologous with certain structural principles which also inform social interaction in the

Marquesas. In doing so, he shows how the *etua*, a kind of generic godling, can be transformed into the *hope Vehine* or “buttocks women” and the *Vai o Kena*, “the bath of Kena,” a hero who plays a crucial role in the charter mythology of tattooing.²⁷ Like other motifs in the corpus of Polynesian tattooing practices, which Gell analyzed in *Wrapping in Images*, “their nomenclature and meaning . . . is hardly intelligible except in the light of manifold mythic motifs and ritual symbolic devices,”²⁸ which Gell recounts in his fuller exposition of the material, and shows to be connected to the agentive function of tattooing in a way parallel to the style of Marquesan art, albeit on a different cultural level, a more specifically symbolic one. Thus, one design, the *Malu*, Gell glosses as “perfectly sealed vagina,” which he is able then to refer back to a mythological archetype of vaginaless woman who plays a central role in the charter mythology of tattooing.²⁹ The symbolic meanings of these motifs – for example the “flying fox” which wraps itself in the second skin of its wings when at rest – are internally related to the agentive function of tattooing which Gell identifies, namely the creation of a second skin, which both ensures the retention of stored vital essence and protects the bearer from invasion by external agencies by sealing bodily orifices. Tattooing thus was “a means of magically fortifying young men and preparing them for military exploits.”³⁰ Iconography, symbolic meaning, and aesthetics do have a role to play in Gellian art analysis, but only properly framed within a robust sociology and cognitive psychology.

It is not difficult to find parallels between Gell’s project and certain strands of art-historical work. Following the example of David Freedberg in *The Power of Images* (1989), a number of art historians have been concerned to explore the performative aspects in particular of religious and ritual arts.³¹ In seeking to distance himself from aestheticism and iconography, Gell also resonates with the concerns of some of the more important recent work critical of “new” and post-structuralist art historians. Donald Preziosi sees both as elements of a “eucharistic” model of art, in which the role of the interpreter is simply to reveal the truth immanent within the work itself.³² He, and other scholars advocating semiotic approaches to art, have criticized as logocentric the traditional focus on meaning immanent in the work and the language-based model of signification according to which such meanings are decoded.³³

Paralleling Gell’s interest in the presenting image, such critics of traditional art-historical interpretation have sought to open out analysis in a number of directions. In particular, they focus on the “figurative,” the

specifically visual ways in which, for example, stories are narrated through pictures, rather than shortcutting analysis by seeing the image as secondary illustration of some primary text.³⁴ Like Gell's, such approaches see meaning as a transaction in time, produced in the context of a relationship between work and recipient. Production aesthetics is increasingly supplemented by reception aesthetics, exploring "the lines of signification opening out from the work"³⁵ as it is appropriated by individual viewers engaging the work in both its original context³⁶ and the multiplicity of other settings in which a work might find itself through the vicissitudes of history.³⁷

It is increasingly recognized that adequate analysis of the engagement between work and recipient requires categories additional to linguistic ones. W. J. T. Mitchell, asking "what do pictures really want?," advocates an approach to pictures which goes beyond "looking at them as vehicles of meaning or instruments of power" and seeks to understand "the uncanny personhood of pictures," and the kinds of physical, social, and erotic engagement to which that gives rise.³⁸ He argues that a focus on the role of vision in "mediating social relations" in ways not reducible to language might provide theoretical resources to elaborate Michael Fried's account of the ways paintings "arrest" and "enthrall" beholders as the necessary precondition of any symbolic communication.³⁹ Semiotic approaches seek to supplement the "semantic" analysis characteristic of iconography, with attention to issues of rhetoric, which would analyze the "affective efficacy" of works of art.⁴⁰ Affect is a dimension of experience not easily amenable to analysis in terms internal to linguistics or iconography. Correspondingly, scholars have sought extra-cultural bases to the agency of visual art. Bal and Bryson allude to the implications which Freudian psychology might have for the limits to the conventionalism in the functioning of visual art.⁴¹ Drawing on the phenomenology of perception, Effimova (1997) argues that it was the sensory effects of the paintings like Alexander Laktionov's *Letter to the Front* that constituted the "realism" of Soviet Socialist Realism, not the banal party dogmas encoded in the iconography.⁴² Powerful manipulation of the play of light and shadow, suggesting dazzling sunlight and parching heat, exercised a magical affective charge by literally enlivening the viewers, making them feel more real, by the force of the paintings' appeal to the human sensorium.

With relatively few exceptions, however, art historians still show "minimal disciplinary awareness of [the] perceptual and cognitive psychology" which would be the necessary theoretical foundation to make good on