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CHAPTER 11

ART AS ACTION, ART AS EVIDENCE

HOWARD MORPHY

Introduction: a methodological perspective on the anthropology of art

My aim in this chapter is not to produce another review of the state of studies of art in anthropology and material culture. I have in the past produced two such reviews (Morphy 1994; Morphy and Perkins 2006a) and repetition is in the nature of reviews. There has recently been a tendency in art history as well as anthropology to question the category of 'art' and to replace it with a more general term such as 'visual culture' or 'image', yet the same subset of material culture objects remains as the subject of analysis. I began academic life as a student of material culture and then found myself focusing almost by accident on a subset of objects that fell into many people's ordinary language category of 'art object' (Morphy 1977). I have come to believe in the utility of the concept of art and that the practice and performance of art reflects particular ways of knowing and acting in the world. So this chapter is a strong defence of the idea of 'art' but it also recognizes its complexity and the fact that as a concept, 'art' is fuzzy around the edges. I use a concept of family resemblance and see

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art objects as forming polythetic sets. The category contains within it an immense diversity and includes objects that have little in common with each other and require very different methods of analysis. However, at the heart of this concept of art lies a set of loosely connected features or themes around which the idea of art coalesces: art is a form of action, art production is integral to meaning creating processes and requires a sense of form, and art is associated with aesthetic experience. It does not surprise me that, at a very general level, these themes resonate with those of art history and the philosophy of art since European art is equally a part of the family or a member of the set. I define meaning in a very broad way so that it embraces both decorative effect and dense iconographies: meaning merges with meaningful.

I believe art is worth studying for a number of methodological and theoretical reasons. Regarding method, art is often produced in durable and, today, in recordable form. It is analysable from many different perspectives and can become part of the process of interaction between researcher and producer: works of art can be interrogated in their cultural contexts. Many artworks outlast the moment of their making and their maker and hence they are part of the durable record of human action. Unpicking those sequences of action through the analysis of form and connecting form to context are ways in which history can enter anthropology and anthropology can enter history. Works of art enable anthropologists to work with art historians to analyse formal relationships and contextual data that reflect trajectories of change and regional dynamics. Finally, in theoretical terms, if I am right that art production is a significant way in which human beings act in the world—one that reflects emotional and experiential dimensions of being in the world—then art provides us with access to something that is too important to neglect.

Interestingly, if anything in recent years, anthropology has had a greater impact on art history than the other way around. The work of David Freedberg (1989), Hans Belting (2001), and Mariët Westermann (2005) exemplifies the theoretical impact that anthropology has had on some art historians. The impact of art history on anthropology occurred earlier and can be seen to influence anthropologists of art from Boas (1927) to the present; but interestingly art history and its findings have had little impact on the discipline of anthropology as a whole. Archaeology's relationship with art history has been both continuous from the early days of the disciplines and contentious (e.g. White 1992; Scott 2006). The contention I believe is located in precisely the same dialectic between a fine art concept of art and a cross-cultural or generic concept of art that has had its impact on art history and anthropology. In anthropology and archaeology, it has resulted historically in a neglect of art as a research resource, and in art history, it underlies the discomfort with the category of art for the analysis of images. This chapter is structured as an argument in which I move from the reasons why non-Western art has been neglected in art history and in anthropology through definitional issues concerning what kind of thing art is, to a methodological perspective that flows out of that definitional prolegomena. Art has to be seen in its full complexity.

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Art and material culture

In the 1970s, Peter Ucko led a revival in the study of material culture in Britain. In giving the Curl lecture on the topic of penis sheaths (Ucko 1969) he expressed his surprise that material culture had been long neglected as a source of evidence in anthropology both because of what it could contribute to the study of society as a whole but equally for its intrinsic interest. Ucko's study of material culture was interdisciplinary. It cut across anthropology, archaeology, and art history, and it was inclusive of all categories of artefact from predynastic clay figurines, to house types, to humble and not so humble penis sheaths. In recent years, there has been a considerable growth in the cross-disciplinary study of material culture. However, in many respects Ucko's original concerns apply as much today as they did then to the study of one branch of material culture studies: the study of art. It is not that art is unstudied, but that its study has remained the province of art historians or other specialists in the study of art (see Heyd 2005: 1 ff. for a relevant discussion). The study of art in other disciplines tends to be quarantined off as the concern of subdisciplinary specialists.

The neglect of the study of art by anthropologists is at first difficult to explain. The societies that anthropologists study—Western and non-Western—all seem to produce works that fit into a broadly defined category of artwork. I will leave matters of definition for the moment. There is great interest in the arts of different cultures: major institutions collect and exhibit it, art is proffered as an arena for cross-cultural discourse and understanding, and art is integral to value creation processes in many different societies. Art ought to be both a source of evidence and a medium for communicating values, knowledge, and ideas cross-culturally. It would seem that in neglecting the audience for art, in standing aside from the spaces for art discourse within the anthropologist's own society, and in failing to capitalize on the interest that students have in Western and non-Western art, anthropologists are missing out on considerable opportunities.

The neglect of art as a source of data is not confined to anthropology and archaeology. The American philosopher Mark Johnson chides his contemporaries for their attitude to art:

> Contemporary Anglo American philosophers recognise that the nature of meaning is a pivotal philosophical issue, but they almost never regard art or aesthetics as relevant to this topic. They labour under the illusion of the cognitivist view that meaning is properly only a linguistic phenomenon—a matter of words and sentences. Moreover they tend to think of meaning as involving the truth condition of sentences.... [If considered at all] meaning in painting gets reduced to the representational element.
>
> Johnson (2007: 207)

Johnson opposes this to popular attitudes to art in Western society where 'in sharp contrast with this traditional philosophical disparagement of the arts, most people

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turn to art not just because of its entertainment value, but precisely because it is meaningful and because it helps to understand our human condition' (Johnson 2007: 208). Art has this peculiar characteristic of being highly valued and very visible in contemporary Western society, yet at the same time of being separated as a source of data from general studies of human society and often disregarded as a source of knowledge. Yet if it is accepted that art should be treated as a source of information like any other, the question that then arises is what, if anything, makes art different. My answer will in part be that the very thing that makes art different is what makes it a vital source of data for the study of human society. And here it is necessary to provide a minimal definition of art. It is the production and use of expressive and meaningful forms—aesthetic and representational—for particular purposes. Art objects are usually multifunctional: they can serve an infinity of purposes and need to be treated in the context of the material culture of a society as a whole. Consequently, art as a form of intentional human action can only be understood in the context of the relationships and objectives of human beings acting in the social world.

Alfred Gell in his thought-provoking book, *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory* (1998) appears to oppose an action-oriented theory of art with semantic and aesthetic theories. I will later address other aspects of his theoretical approach to agency and to the overly narrow concept of aesthetics that he adopts. However, at this stage in the development of my argument, it is worth pointing out that the attributes of artworks are precisely what enable them to be used to act in the world and what in some cases enables agency to be attributed to them. As the distinguished archaeologist and art historian Irene Winter has written:

> Once the relational nexus surrounding and generating the artwork is seen to function as part of a holistic system, affective properties and meaning intersect with social agency. That is instead of having to choose 'art as a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (Gell 1998: 6) one is enjoined to see art both as a system of meaning encoding propositions about the world and as a system of action intended to change the world, precisely because the excitation generated by the art work lies in the interaction between the two.
>
> Winter (2007: 62; see also Layton 2003)

It is important to stress at this point that the art that I am referring to is not the category of Western fine art or high art. Indeed that particular narrowly defined and conceived category of art object is where much of the problem has lain and is in part the source of the neglect of art by anthropologists and to a lesser extent by archaeologists. The Western category of fine art is generally accepted to have developed over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its history is extremely complex and any generalizations about it are likely to be contested at the level of detail. In essence it is art as a set-apart category of objects viewed independently of their function, housed in institutions of fine art, and appreciated for their aesthetic

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value, on the basis of disinterested viewing and judgement (see e.g. Winter 2002: 2). Johnson (2007: 210) sees the paradigm shift involving the separation of art from scientific reason as crucial:

> The rise of the sciences of human nature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries prompted philosophers interested in the arts to change their focus from the nature of art to an almost exclusive concern with how the mind works in aesthetic judgement. By focussing on the faculties of mind that give rise to judgements about beauty—especially the faculties known as imagination and feeling—these philosophers ceased to regard art as a way of worldmaking.
>
> Johnson (2007: 209)

The philosophy of art has tended to collapse aesthetics into beauty (Johnson 2007: 211). Although the concept of beauty associated with Kantian aesthetics is itself highly complex, the association of art with beauty has encouraged some to reject art (and aesthetics for that matter) as a useful category for cross-cultural analysis either on the grounds that it is subjective or that it inevitably involves Western aesthetic evaluations (Overing 1996; Gell 1998). Rather than rejecting the category of aesthetics it is important to disaggregate it from its entanglement with beauty and investigate it in the context of the societies who produced the artworks (see the essays in Coote and Shelton 1992).

There has also been a tendency to associate fine art production with individual creativity. Consequently, connoisseurship in art history has in part been directed to authenticating artworks by identifying the individual hand of the artist, and evaluating them according to qualitative judgements applied to the artist's oeuvre. The focus of this chapter is on the visual arts, but parallel histories can be written for music (see e.g. Goehr 1992).

As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated, fine art is deeply connected to value and status creation processes in Western societies, which are linked in turn to the value of objects in the market (see MacClancy 1988 with reference to the market in 'primitive' art). The value creation processes of the fine art category have been centred on European art history and on the identification of a canon of Western fine art, which provides, at least in part, the skeleton for Western art history. The canon encompasses non-Western and 'ancient' arts to the extent that the latter can be thought to contribute to the historical trajectory of form in Western art. The canon is additive. Connections are traced back in time to Greece, Ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia. The inclusion of indigenous art occurred after non-Western forms began to influence the development of Western art. Once acknowledged, non-Western art tended to be placed in categories such as Oriental art or primitive art, and occupied spaces in art museums and exhibition calendars reserved for non-Western art. To an extent, non-Western artworks were included not in their own right but as they were 'discovered' and appreciated by Western art worlds. In Jacques Maquet's terms, set out in his book *The Aesthetic Experience: an*

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anthropologist looks at the visual arts (1986), they were art by metamorphosis, incorporated within the Western framework of fine art. The Eurocentric nature of this 'inclusion' was reflected in the fact that until recently, works by contemporary indigenous artists were in general excluded from the primitive fine art category—primitive art was the art of societies before they were 'contaminated' by outside influence (Price 1989; Errington 1998).

It is certainly important for anthropologists to include 'fine art' as a source of evidence for the analysis of economic and value creation processes in contemporary Western society. This is not only because it encapsulates the ways in which cultural production is caught up in economic and political processes in Western societies but because of the hegemonic nature of the Western fine art category in global processes and its influence on the history of world arts and on contemporary art production. However, in order to understand those very processes and the contemporary challenges to the category of Western fine art, a broader conception of art is required.

The majority of works included in art galleries and museums were not initially produced as works of 'fine' art, but for use in particular contexts—as religious objects, symbols of status, bodily adornments, functional artefacts, embellishments of everyday objects, 'scientific' illustrations, and so on. The status of art by metamorphosis applied as much to medieval and Egyptian art as it did to the arts of Africa or Oceania. Placing works in the original contexts of their production is a main part of the job of art history. Art history is likely to be biased in the direction of the works that are included in art museums—because of the resources that they provide and because of the interest the public has in the works of art they contain. And indeed, art historians and curators do place most works of art included in museums of fine art in the context of their own place and time, researching their history independent of their subsequent recognition as fine art. The iconographic significance of Byzantine icons or Renaissance religious paintings is considered relevant to understanding them as works of art; function and significance is considered relevant to understanding Egyptian or Roman art (Figure 11.1). Even so, as archaeologist Sarah Scott (2006) argues for Roman art, the bias from fine art has had a considerable impact on how they are researched, interpreted, curated, and exhibited. Until recently, this has been even more so in the case of most non-Western art.

Perhaps because so-called 'primitive' art came late to influence Western traditions, perhaps because it was harder to view as antecedent to European traditions, its art history has been largely neglected. In some cases, this omission has been deliberate. For example, art historian and curator William Rubin wrote 'the ethnologists' primary concern—the specific function and significance of each of these objects—is irrelevant to my topic, except in so far as these facts may have been known to the modern artists in question' (2006: 130). Rubin was writing with reference to the 1984 exhibition *Primitivism in Modern Art* that he co-curated with Kirk Varnedoe. The exhibition created considerable controversy precisely

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Fig. 11.1 The Westminster Panels. The panels were commissioned by or for George Fascet, Abbot of Westminster from about 1498 to 1500. They depict the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin standing on plinths, which bear the shield of arms of Westminster Abbey and the Abbot himself. While today they are celebrated as works of fine art, the fact that they are remarkable in part because they survived the destruction of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries signals a quite different history as religious icons. Originally forming the wings of an altarpiece, the oil painted panels represent the high-quality religious artwork available to wealthy medieval Londoners of the time. The Annunciation scene is depicted in glowing colours, with the Archangel Gabriel on the left panel and the Virgin Mary on the right (photo: Museum of London).

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because it seemed to subordinate non-European art to Western art (see essays in Morphy and Perkins 2006b: Part II—Primitivism, Art, and Artifacts). The neglect of non-Western art by Western art museums and art historians has tended to create a disjunction between works of art that are treated in their own right and for which information about the context of production and intention of the artist are considered relevant and those for which it is not. As a consequence art historians, with notable exceptions (see e.g. Boone 1986; Blier 1987; McNaughton 1987; Philips 1998), have neglected to study non-Western art in its own contexts of production.

One of the tasks of the anthropology and archaeology of art is simply to provide the equivalent data on non-European artworks that the art historian provides for works in the Western traditions. This does not mean it is assumed that they are the same kind of things.

Art as a cross-cultural category

I have argued in detail elsewhere that if anthropologists are to find the concept of art useful, valid or relevant in their research they must employ a cross-cultural and cross-temporal category, one that is distanced dialogically from the concept of art in any particular society (Morphy 2007b). The argument applies equally to archaeologists and art historians. Anthropological categories are derived from cross-cultural comparison and hence are likely to cover great variation in the phenomenon under investigation whether it is religion, gender, aesthetics, or art. Categories are therefore always emergent as understanding of human behaviour across space and time changes. They are reflected as much in the sets of things that people write about as in any substantive definition that they may attribute to them. To an extent, an anthropological category is an intuitive one that attempts to contain the intuitions of people from different cultures. This is why I have argued that the cross-cultural category of artwork is best seen as a polythetic set linked, in Wittgensteinean terms, by 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein 1953; aphorisms 65–66). Of the things people refer to as games, for example, Wittgenstein wrote 'if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that' (Wittgenstein 1953; aphorism 66). I would argue that art, like games, is a well worked category, one that has been subject to dialogue in the long term, and that while no single attribute, feature, or essence is going to be a common relatum, 'aesthetic effect broadly defined is likely to be a core feature of the set even if it is not an attribute of every member (artwork)' (Morphy 2007b: 198n12).

In her article on art and archaeologists, Sarah Scott argues that it is important to distance the study of Roman art from the post-Enlightenment aesthetic criteria

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Fig. 11.2 Mosaic from Lullingstone Roman villa (4th century AD). Lullingstone Roman Villa is a villa built during the Roman occupation of Britain, situated near the village of Eynsford in north-west Kent, south-eastern England. The mosaic is from the dining room of the villa and represents the abduction of Europa by Jupiter disguised as a bull with two cupids (photo: English Heritage).

with which it has become entangled (Figure 11.2). She shows how criteria associated with Western fine art are applied to Roman art in such a way that Roman art becomes seen and categorized according to the aesthetic judgements of the present: 'we are placing them into an artificial category that has more to do with the development of modern art history and aesthetics than with the contexts for which such objects were originally created' (Scott 2006: 628). Scott is also critical of many of the categories and concepts of art history, terms such as schools and workshops that have been applied directly to what she refers to as ancient arts (2006: 653). The point is not so much that such concepts may not be relevant for cross-cultural analysis. Rather, it is that they should come out of the analysis of the objects in context rather than being imposed on the past as part of an interpretative framework.

The art historian David Freedberg has been equally critical of the constraining nature of the categories of 'fine' art or 'high' art (Freedberg 1989: 22–23). In his analysis of 'realistic' images derived directly from a person's features, he draws

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connections between, among other things, Roman death masks, the early modern religious sculptures encountered by pilgrims on the climb up the Sacro Monte di Varese in northern Italy, and the wax figures in Madame Tussauds in London. Freedberg notes that in the present day the representations in the wax museum are generally not classified as works of art. Indeed, he argues that we have been taught to see them as not being art. He might also have pointed out that 'sculptures' very similar in their illusionistic realism do have a place as contemporary art.

Duane Hanson's (1925–1996) sculptures of accident victims, American tourists, or a woman pushing a shopping trolley were intended to look like real people, and the 'artist' employed analogous techniques to those used to make the 'non-art' waxwork figures (Figure 11.3). In writing about his work, art museum curators are required to distance it from the craftsmanship of Madame Tussauds, for example,

Fig. 11.3 Duane Hanson, *Tourists*, 1970. Hanson cast his sculptures from life. His sculptures have the appearance of people one might meet outside the gallery, caught unawares. In this case, they are stereotypes of American tourists. The male and female figures were cast separately in the artist's studio and the models never even met. Medium polyester resin and fibreglass, painted in oil, and mixed media. Size of Man 152 × 80.50 × 31 cm; Woman 160 × 44 × 37 cm (National Galleries of Scotland accession no. GMA 2132).

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by endowing it with a higher purpose. The website for the exhibition at the Tennis Palace Museum, Helsinki, *Duane Hanson—Sculptures of the American Dream*, asserts that 'Hanson's aim was not to copy real people, but to depict typical humans and humanity in general' (University of Helsinki 2007). The comparison between Madame Tussauds and Hanson's sculptures brings out the diversity of criteria used to separate fine art from its opposite. Philosopher Nick Zangwill, hinting at an institutional definition of art, notes that 'few would think that the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's are works of art. But how are they different from Hanson's sculptures? It seems to be important that Hanson's figures are intended for exhibition in the contexts we normally see sculptures' (Zangwill 2002: 113). The distinction between fine art and non-fine art (or even non-art) in these cases is not helpful either to understanding the particular histories of the works themselves as forms or the impact that they have on the viewer. They are, of course, relevant to understanding the Western fine art category and its articulation within the art market. Freedberg argues for similarities in the ways in which the sculptures at Varese act on the viewer and the impact of images in Madame Tussauds.

Freedberg suggests that if we trace the history of such images back to the Roman period and beyond they can be seen as belonging to the same sequence. The images that he focuses on are ones that create the illusion of the actuality of the person, which make the absent present. They include a great range of different types of images from supposed direct impressions of a person's features as in the case of the Turin shroud, death masks, and wax images. He extends his analysis to include images that are less direct in their representation of the features of a person but which convey attributes of movement or form that are taken to be the person themselves. He argues that a similar range of responses is engendered by such illusionistic representations, irrespective of whether they are or are not classified as 'fine' art. In many respects, they belong to the same set for analytic purposes. Concluding his discussion about wax images, Freedberg notes that 'we need to treat the claim of aesthetic differentiation with caution' (1989: 231). Here Freedberg is arguing for a wider category *than* works of art in order to include the relevant body of data. However, I would argue that this must be seen as a separate issue from a wider definition of the category *of* art. Freedberg argues that we have been taught to see Madame Tussauds as something other than an art gallery and so we remove the works collected within it from the category of *fine art* and displace them from the category of art altogether.

Much of the controversy over the category of art is caused by two factors. One is the collapsing of the broader cross-cultural category of art as a mode of human action into the narrower and relatively recent Western category of fine art as an institutionally defined set of objects. The other is the desire to make the cross-cultural category of art all encompassing and self-contained. All categories of material culture object are defined by or include attributes that they share with other categories of object. It is not a sufficient argument against the category of art

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that all art objects share some attributes with objects belonging to other categories. Many analytic concepts cross-cut categories defined by other features. Boats, for example, share in common with houses, carriages, and drinking vessels the fact that they are containers. Scott and Freedberg both express unease with the category of art because it is too closely associated with the Western category of fine art. Scott is wary of an aesthetic approach to 'ancient' art objects and Freedberg sees a category wider than fine art as necessary to his analysis of affect, of the power of the works concerned, and hence he subsumes 'art within the history of images' (Freedberg 1989: 23). In Freedberg's case he both gives priority in his definition of art to the category of objects defined as fine art and then sees that many of the objects he has analysed need to be analysed as a part of a wider set. Most of the examples he includes do fit well within the broader concept of art that I have defined. Even if they did not, the fact that a wider set of objects is required to analyse a particular topic—for example, the spiritual power attributed to objects—does not undermine the category of object concerned. Munn's (1986) analysis of value creation processes in Gawa, for example, brings together sets of objects on the basis of criteria such as lightness and heaviness that cross-cut categories of material objects defined on other bases, for example canoes or boundary markers.

Despite its resilience, the issue of developing a substitute term for 'art' is a recurrent theme, so it is worth briefly considering the question of the dissolution of the category of art altogether. There are two main issues: first, whether any of the substitute terms are adequate; secondly, whether or not a cross-cultural category of art can be usefully developed that is free from the biases of Western fine art. Clearly it is possible, as George Kubler (1962: 9) argued, to include artworks under the category of 'the history of things'—his substitute for what he referred to as the 'bristling ugliness of "material culture"'. Others have included art under the more euphonious rubric 'visual culture' (e.g. Mitchell 1986, 2006). And as Jeremy Coote (1992) argues in the case of the 'everyday vision' of cattle-keeping people in southern Sudan it may be more useful to apply a broad concept of aesthetics rather than art. It is also possible to include many artworks under rubrics such as 'images' (Freedberg 1989; Belting 2001) or 'pictures' (Clegg 1987; Mitchell 2006). All of these concepts are relevant ones for cross-cultural analysis. However, I would argue that the former categories are too broad and the latter categories too narrow to encompass the set of objects that are generally brought together under the category of 'art'. In addition, the need to substitute them for art is either because the focus of the study is wider than art or because the definition of art (and in some cases the definition of aesthetics associated with it) is too narrow. In Freedberg's case it was necessary to replace 'art' with 'images' in order to avoid the narrowness of the definition of fine art, while archaeologist John Clegg, like Scott, wishes to escape from overly narrow concepts of the aesthetic.

A central issue is thus to free ourselves from the narrow conception of art associated with Kantian aesthetics and the Western fine art category. By foregrounding fine art,

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we have been unable to see the family resemblances that connect similar practices across cultures in space and time. The correction is equally relevant to understanding art as a form of action in Western society, bringing together the diversity of practices that intuitively fall into the same broad category, connecting, for example, fine art, with design, craft, decoration, graffiti, and so on. It might be argued that we should encompass art within the broader category of aesthetics rather than arguing for it as a distinct category in its own right (see Coote 1992 for a relevant discussion). Aesthetics, however, while integral to many people's conception of art, is also a much broader category of experience that can be applied equally to features of the natural world as to most areas of human life, whereas 'art' refers specifically to the products and forms of human action. The concept of art emphasizes the connection between aesthetics, representation, and action; art is a way of acting meaningfully in the world. Perhaps it is simply that aesthetics itself has become so closely associated with the idea of disinterested contemplation that it is necessary to reconnect it with purposive action to signify its more general relevance to understanding human history and society.

It is an irony of anthropology and archaeology that by placing objects in the contexts of their own times we are likely to see that they have much in common cross-culturally. It is the narrow Western concept of fine art that has been the distancing mechanism. However, I should stress that the cross-cultural category of art does not correspond to any indigenous or historical category or concept of art any more than it does to Western fine art. Gell's advocacy of 'methodological philistinism' is relevant here. By analogy with agnosticism, as far as other cultures' religious beliefs are concerned, methodological philistinism is 'an attitude of resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of works of art' (Gell 1992b: 42). There is, however, a distinction that needs to be made between the analyst's own aesthetic response to the object and the aesthetic value it has in the context of the producing society. The matter is more a question of suspending aesthetic judgement rather than adopting a position of philistinism. In his later book *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998), he goes even further than this in criticizing the utility of the concept of aesthetics in cross-cultural analysis. He does so by adopting a very narrow definition of aesthetics, which identifies the aesthetic object with the beautiful (Morphy 2009), and he has been criticized by Winter as reducing the art historians' enterprise by 'employing an old-fashioned definition of aesthetics that demands the work be alienated from its originating context' (Winter 2007: 60).

The absence of terms that can be readily translated into English as 'art' is not a challenge to the idea of a cross-cultural category (see Van Damme 1997 for a relevant discussion). The English category of art is complex and contested and itself comprises a polythetic set: there is no more than a family resemblance among the different things that can be included in the art category. Nonetheless it is an

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important part of the method of studying non-Western art to analyse the terminologies that apply to 'artworks' and the language that is applied to them.

In approaching the study of visual art in an ethnographic, historic, or archaeological context, the initial approach needs to be pragmatic. Is the material object concerned one that fits into the category of art, or is the analyst's concept of art useful in understanding the object or releasing its potential as evidence for the study of society? Some studies may of course have art as their initial focus: people whose main interest is in studying art, or people who might have a hypothesis about human development or evolutionary psychology or language origins that rests on a concept of art. That does not mean that their research should be restricted only to the body of works they include in the category of art works. Here I would agree with Freedberg that 'no history of art can afford to ignore these lessons of a history of images more widely conceived' (1989: 281). But the fact that it is necessary to place art objects within broader categories and contexts in order to analyse it does not mean that the category is not itself relevant.

Methodological reflections on art as a cross-cultural category

Given the features I see as central to the concept of art, analysis and interpretation will move in the direction of the use of artworks in context, the effect the work has on the observer, and the ways in which it is meaningful to members of the society. On a priori grounds, those questions involve understanding how it is made, how it is used and experienced, how it means, and to whom it means. In the actual research process, it should make little difference whether the works concerned are labelled as art or not. An ethnographically based anthropological study is centred on distinctions that are relevant to the society concerned and understanding the object in the context of the society as a whole. For the anthropologist the most useful thing about the idea of art is that it acts as a flag to signal the kind of thing the object might be. It acknowledges that the semantic and aesthetic dimensions of material culture objects may be integral to their use and places the objects concerned in a broader comparative framework. It directs attention to the form of the object in order to discover what it contributes to the context in which it is used. It requires the researcher to engage with the question of what art, as a form of action, achieves that would not be achieved otherwise.

Thus, my main reason for defending the usefulness of the category of 'art object' is that art is a particular way of acting in the world. If we neglect the art dimension of objects, we fail to understand their significance and overlook a source of data

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that is often crucial to understanding many aspects of society. As the introduction to Thomas Heyd and John Clegg's book on the aesthetics of rock art suggests, 'If the task of the social scientist is to provide explanations of the forms of life of people in society, neglecting to consider the aesthetics of objects that have aesthetically salient values may lead to the omission of significant sources of information on those societies' (Heyd 2005: 4).

The approach I adopt is in a number of respects almost the antithesis of Alfred Gell's (1992b, 1998). He denies that there is a cross-cultural category of art object but argues for an anthropological approach to objects as agents as the core of a theoretical approach to art. It is certainly important to understand the ways in which material culture objects are integral to social life and to value creation processes, and how in many contexts they stand for, represent, or take the place of human actors and often are endowed with agency by people. However, I am resistant to applying concepts like agency to the objects themselves just as I think that metaphors such as the 'social life of things' (Appadurai 1986a) are overused. And ironically I am cautious precisely because I share Gell's belief that a form of agnosticism lies at the heart of method in anthropology (Gell 1992b). Seeing objects as agents—as persons—collapses theory and ethnography in a way that diverts anthropology from its analytic task. Social relationships are an important focus of anthropological analysis, though I would not quite give them the central role that Gell does. All material objects are entangled in social processes and, clearly, they often do mediate relationships between people and domains of existence, for example, the earthly and the spiritual. And material culture objects can be *believed* to be animate and can be endowed with the attributes of persons and responded to as if they were persons—though it needs to be established in particular cases that this is so. But the analyst who elides the difference between the social relations entailed in the use of objects and the observed belief that some objects are animate, by endowing the objects themselves with agency, cuts too many corners. The agnosticism, the suspension of belief that the anthropologist is required to espouse, is in practice very different from that suggested by Gell. It is necessary to get to see the images in the context of the viewing society and to enter the minds of the makers as much as possible, an exercise that requires an exploration of the cognitive and expressive dimensions of objects, answering the question of how they are seen and how they mean. It is vital that anthropologists acknowledge that certain material culture objects are *thought* to have agency and are *believed* to affect the world. Indeed some do affect the world as a result of the conscious or unconscious agency of people, for example, works that have a performative function, or mark status, or move people emotionally. But the job of the anthropologist, of the analyst, is to determine how they have that impact on people and an effect in the world, how it is that people can believe that objects have agency. As Winter (2007: 43) has written it is important 'to distinguish between agency ascribed by the analyst of a given work from

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the agency marked by cultural practice, and even grammar, within the originating culture, if we are to fully understand the historical role(s) accorded to artworks . . . to avoid conflating indigenous and analytical perspectives until and unless they can be shown to be congruent'. The work of the anthropologist may begin with the insight that a sculpture is thought to be alive or that death is thought to result from the performance of a dance. Consequently the anthropologist places the questions of what kind of impact a work of art has in context, how it has that impact, how it means or has meaning, at the centre of the analysis of art. Indeed, in many of the analyses that Gell undertakes in *Art and Agency* he exemplifies that method.

The methodological core of an anthropological study of art forms around two sets of questions. The first concerns how the work of art operates in context: the how of meaning and the how of aesthetic effect, 'how . . . intention has been realised' (Wicks 1997: 395). Given the understanding of what art *is*, set out above, 'how' is directly linked to what the object means, what its impact is on the viewer, and what its aesthetic effect is. Indeed analytically 'how' is a prerequisite of understanding what something means even in contexts where we can ask the producers, viewers, or participants. What something means requires analysis. It is seldom reducible to a simple gloss or a particular exegetical interpretation, however useful the latter might be. In archaeological contexts it is essential to the interpretative process: 'how' involves bringing context into the analysis of form.

The second and complementary set of questions centres on the explanation of form itself. Why does the object have the shape it does? Why is it made in the way it is? These questions are clearly interrelated, but each provides an independent perspective on objects. They place them in somewhat different temporal frames.

The first set of questions are centred on the power, meaning, and significance of objects in context, and the second set focuses on their historical trajectory, how they came into being and what technical and cognitive processes are involved in their manufacture. The two come together in the bodies of knowledge that are required to make the objects, in the embodied processes that influence the form of the work, and in the technical skills needed and that may be directly connected to the meaning and significance that the object has to the maker or viewer. The explication of form encourages a journey into the past to trace the histories of designs, techniques, and raw materials. This in turn provides evidence that is essential for a dynamic and historically informed view of the trajectories of regional systems as a whole. The core questions are no different for art than for any other material culture object. The difference lies in what it is necessary to take into consideration in answering them.

The analysis of form is central to both questions of context and questions of process. Form needs to be broadly defined to include all of the material attributes of the objects in addition to shape: the raw materials, their properties such as weight or sheen, colour and texture, and so on. In context, attributes such as

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Fig. 11.4 ***Kula* canoe setting off on a voyage from Vakuta to Kitava (Papua New Guinea) laden with goods for exchange (photo: Shirley Campbell 1977).**

lightness or heaviness, as Nancy Munn (1986) showed in her classic study of *kula* exchange on the island of Gawa, or the quality or composition of the raw material, as Lechtman (1977) demonstrated in the case of Andean gold alloys, are central to understanding the value creation processes associated with art. Such qualities often cross-cut components of form. For example, in the case of the designs on Trobriand canoe prows, the decorated canoes convey a sense of lightness and speed in addition to seductive beauty that is in harmony with the objectives of the voyagers on the *kula* (Campbell 2002) (Figure 11.4). The analysis of details of the form of designs or the different colours or materials used in different contexts provides the basis for asking questions about the structure of systems of meaning and expression. Those questions themselves can only be answered fully by placing the material artwork in the context of action. Nonetheless, if the analyst carries forward information about the diversity of possible forms, and knowledge of the forms that could have been used, he or she is able to view the event more from the perspective of the actor. The wealth of knowledge and experience that the actor brings to the situation, much of which does not find expression in a particular context, in part explains how the object functions in context. Hence part of the method of the study of forms in art must be an initial analysis of the range of material available—museum collections, photographs from the past and observations from the present—to begin to understand the parameters of variation as well as to get a feeling for how the art might work.

Form will also give access to representational processes manifest in the art and to iconographies that may be central to the functioning of a particular system. I find it useful, following Nancy Munn's study, *Walbiri Iconography* (1973), and influenced by semiotic theory, to distinguish broadly between motivated and arbitrary systems

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of representation, though with a strong note of caution that the boundaries between the two are very fuzzy and that each contains within its ambit great diversity. The attraction of the division is that it acknowledges that most, perhaps all, human societies recognize that some representations are more like their referent than others. They are interpretable at one level by what they resemble. Mimesis falls into this category. In some cases, for example, the many analogues for blood or the hyper-realism of Duane Hanson, or perhaps the Kwakiutl and Haida portrait masks in the theatre of the Potlatch (Rosman and Rubel 1990) (Figure 11.5), the boundary between image and reality merges. And, of course, in representations of the unseen, of the spiritual or imagined, the artwork, the processes involved in art making and the way images enter peoples' lives may in themselves be what makes up the 'real' (see Freedberg 1989: 159). Yet, in many other cases art comprises design elements or schema that are relatively arbitrary or unmotivated in terms of formal resemblance to their referent. The elements are part of systems for encoding meaning that may be limited in their scope to designating particular status categories or may have something of the complexity of verbal languages as a means of conveying information or expressing narratives. Frequently the arbitrary and the motivated are combined within the same overall system. Such systems may be relatively transparent and accessible to those who learn them, and are similar to pictographic writing systems. In some cases, the arbitrary nature of the sign and its uninterpretability out of context or without interpretative guidance is part of what

Fig. 11.5 Haida portrait mask of a dead youth. Masks of this type were used in the winter ceremonial performances of the Haida and other societies of the north-west coast of North America. The rituals included spectacular theatrical performances in which the dead were brought back to life through masquerade. This particular mask of a dead youth is one of a series of four collected by the Reverend Charles Harrison in the 1880s now in the Pitt Rivers Museum. The mask has been attributed to the nineteenth-century Haida artist Simeon Stilthda (photo courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1891.49.3).

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creates its value. *The capacity of human beings to create representations that take into account the ways they will be interpreted and the effect they will have in context is what makes art a powerful resource for action.*

Methodologically it is important to analyse material form and connect that analysis to contexts of use in order to approach the 'how' of meaning and the 'how' of affect. Posing the question of how something is interpreted, or how it has the effect it does on the participants, places the object in the context of action, enabling the researcher to begin to understand the conditions that enable the work of art to be effective in context. It also ensures that the researcher recognizes that the meaning of the object in its wider sense will depend on who is viewing it and what experience and knowledge they bring to the event or context. Anthropologically we should be in a position to reduce the ambiguity of our interpretations and increase their accuracy through fieldwork. It is self-evident that the same geometric sign can mean completely different things within a culture according to context and that across cultures its meanings may vary even more widely. It is possible to gain an idea of the structural properties of an encoding or representational system through formal analysis, to get an idea of whether or not it is likely to encode meanings in a precise way. However, it is only by gaining additional contextual information, such as access to the range of meanings associated with particular graphic elements and to the information that the interpreter or viewer has in his or her head, that one can begin to see how such systems operate. Similar qualifications apply to expressive aspects of form, since although there may be some similarities in the impact of a design on the senses across cultures, there is likely to be enormous variation in how a particular visual effect is apprehended. In the case of New Guinea Highland body decorations or shields, it is going to depend on factors such as group affiliation or whether one is an aggressor or defender, big man or follower (see O'Hanlon 1995). Thus when interpretations are being sought for representational systems in remote archaeological time, quite different interpretations may be equally plausible.

Reflecting on archaeological contexts, in particular prehistoric ones, is salutary for anthropologists for a number of ironic reasons. Archaeology usually has to deal with limited information and has been forced to come to terms with the limited nature of its contextual data, in the recognition that socio-cultural context is a vital missing ingredient. The evidence that remains is always partial, especially in prehistoric archaeology. This favours certain kinds of representations: rock art and art forms made of durable material, art in burial contexts, and so on. In many cases, nearly all has been lost. Archaeologists need to reconstruct the interpretative context and to reconnect art works to the context of action. Many archaeologists have steered clear of the data from art because of the limited nature of the archaeological record and the difficulties that poses to the interpretative task. This is puzzling in some respects since, in a world that is short of information on qualitative dimensions of the human past, art is a potentially rich

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source of data. Those archaeologists who have included art among their data have indeed been required to develop hypotheses about the 'how' of meaning in order to begin to develop plausible interpretations that can be tested in their archaeological context.

A major problem in archaeological interpretations of art is that the gap between hypothesis and data is often so great that several hypotheses may be equally plausible. The tendency has been to apply a singular interpretative framework, with one replacing another in sequence. Studies of rock art are particularly salutary in this respect with 'art for art's sake' (Halverson 1987), followed by 'hunting magic', followed by hypotheses about religion and gender (Leroi-Gourhan 1989), art as social communication (Conkey 1982) and boundary maintaining mechanisms (Munn 1986), art as an adjunct to trance (Lewis-Williams 1981), and so on. On reflection, most of these hypotheses are equally tenable or at least contain elements that are worth continuing to apply to the data as they accumulate over time and as the complexities of the forms of the art become better known through analysis. It is vital in case studies of prehistoric art to integrate the analysis of the art within the archaeological data set as a whole, to try to place the art in the context of overall spatio-temporal sequences. Equally important is to develop hypotheses about how the art would have been viewed by placing it in the context of the overall landscape (Tilley 1994; Bradley 1997; A. M. Jones 2006).

Where there are historical data, linguistic evidence and, as we come closer to the present, evidence in the form of film and photography, then that evidence supplements the analysis of the formal properties of objects and needs to be set in dialogue with them. The resources available for analysing and interpreting art from the distant and middle distant past can be considerable. Winter (2007), using the evidence of grammatical structure of early Sumerian texts from 2000 BC, has been able to hypothesize how people responded to images of rulers and how imagery was connected in a nexus of relationships that linked the population to the ruler and with god. And the art historian Sarah Fraser (2004) has been able to use surviving sketches produced by wall painters in Dunhuang, China in the ninth century to reconstruct the performative aspects of the art and link them to Buddhist theology and aesthetics. While the addition of other forms of evidence enriches the analysis of art, the corollary of this is that art in turn provides a form of evidence that can contribute greatly to the understanding of society.

The lesson that should be learnt from the present and applied to the past is that art is likely to be determined in multiple ways and integrated in complex ways with social and cultural processes as a whole. Art is not one way of acting in the world but many ways of acting. Within the same society, different art forms require different interpretative frameworks yet in context they will often combine and can interact. Different representational and expressive systems may be combined in the same complex artwork or performance, gaining coherence through association with an overall theme or set of themes.

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As in archaeology, there has been a tendency in anthropology to oppose different attributes of artworks to different effects of artworks, as if they were simple alternatives. In this view, art is either expressive or semantic. Such oppositions are problematic not only because a work of art can be both semantically dense and aesthetically powerful, but also because the very oppositions between the aesthetic—the expressive and the semantic, or between the cognitive and the affective—may be unhelpful oversimplifications. Philosopher Nelson Goodman referred to the dominant dichotomy in Western thought between the cognitive and the emotive:

> On the one side we put sensation, perception, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless responses liking and loathing . . . [But] the work of art is apprehended through feelings as well as through the senses . . . What we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles as well as grasped by our minds, that all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the organism participates in the interpretation of symbols.
>
> Goodman (1976: 247–249).

Yolngu circumcision painting

These rather dense methodological points can be explored further through an example from my own research that illustrates the multidimensional nature of form in art and the complex place it can have in world making. The example I want to use derives from ethnographic work among the Yolngu, Australian Aboriginal people from eastern Arnhem Land in northern Australia (see Morphy 1991, 2007b). On the day of his circumcision, a painting is made on the chest of a Yolngu boy. It is made over a period of several hours by men in a shady place. The painting is produced by a number of men working in turn, and their actions are accompanied by songs that relate to the meaning of the painting. The mothers, sisters, and other women relatives sit on the outside of the painting group. They sometimes perform dances that accompany the songs but they tend to look away from the painting itself. When the painting is completed, the child is carried to the place of circumcision on the shoulders of his mother's brother, decorated in parrot feather string ornaments, with a sacred dilly bag under his arm. At this moment, the child is on display and the ritual performance dramatizes his change of status and his separation from his mother (Figure 11.6).

We can understand much about the significance of the painting as an act without considering its form or aesthetics further. Indeed, that is where anthropological analysis of ritual form has often remained. The painting marks the status of the

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Fig. 11.6 Boys being painted for a circumcision ceremony at Yirrkala, Arnhem Land, Australia in 1974. Roy Marika, a leader in the Yolngu struggle for land rights, beats his clapping sticks in the foreground. Sacred dilly bags are suspended above the boys representing the baskets carried by Ancestral women (photo: Howard Morphy 1974).

boy. The context of painting reflects the gendered division of Yolngu society. The restriction of the painting marks male control of the sacred and dramatizes the process of inclusion into the male world that the child is undergoing through his change of status. The length of time the painting takes indicates the importance of the occasion and the final, almost triumphal, appearance of the boy on the shoulders of his mother's brother focuses attention on him and makes it his day. All this without referring to the form of the painting. Consideration of the form of the painting requires extending the time of the event and making the event part of the temporal continuity of society.

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Fig. 11.7 Body painting at a Yolngu circumcision ceremony at Yilpara, Blue Mud Bay, Arnhem Land, Australia in 2004. The chest painting is in its final stages with lines of cross-hatching being applied by a brush of human hair. The painting belongs to the Djapu clan and the background pattern represents clouds (photo: Howard Morphy).

The painting on the chest is elaborate (Figure 11.7). It combines figurative and geometric motifs and is finished with fine cross-hatching. The design belongs to a set of sacred clan paintings (*likanpuy miny'tji*) associated with *djalkiri* ('foundation') places. The designs are believed to have had their origin in the ancestral past and they encode meanings connected to the ancestral being and events concerned. While sometimes a variant of the same painting may be painted on more than one boy, the number of possible designs is so great that the same design is likely to be repeated only after many years have passed. The painting may be produced in other contexts and on other surfaces, however. A detailed analysis of the overall set of designs reveals an archive of paintings that covers the entire mythological landscape of eastern Arnhem Land (Morphy 1991). The designs are connected to land ownership, mapping the relationships between people and land. By extending the data to include paintings in museum collections and photographs of body paintings over a 60-year period, it is possible to see both continuities in design generation over time and to detect any changes in the usage of the designs and patterns of ownership. In the Yolngu case, the individual painting on a child's chest in a circumcision ceremony is part of the process of the social transmission of religious knowledge over time. This process is deeply connected to the political structure of Yolngu society and clearly contributes to the designs being seen as meaningful objects even if the boy has little idea of the system as a whole. The paintings are decodable and can be interpreted by someone learned in Yolngu art, just as the iconography of Renaissance paintings or Sydney Nolan's Ned Kelly series, which is inspired by the exploits of the renowned Australian bushranger, can be 'decoded' by a knowledgeable person. And the circumcision ceremony is a context in which meaning is built in to the designs through the songs that are sung, the dances that are performed and the ritual process that is taking place. While there are core meanings associated with particular Yolngu designs, the paintings themselves are highly productive semantically and their meaning depends in part on context and on who is viewing them (Morphy 2007a). Some interpretations are restricted, while some depend on individual knowledge and experience.

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During the performance of a circumcision ceremony, the experiential and aesthetic dimensions of the painting are what count for most of the participants. Yolngu paintings contain ancestral power that is expressed by the shimmering brilliance of the design produced by the technique of cross-hatching (Morphy 1992). A similar effect is created by the lorrikeet feather decorations and the sheen of the red ochred body. The boy shines with ancestral power, and the effect is augmented by the drama of the ritual as he comes out of the shade fully painted, to be displayed to the assembled company. The aesthetic effect in this context is relatively autonomous of the iconography of the design and can be understood without entering that domain. At the moment of circumcision, the detailed form of the design will surely be irrelevant to the boy. He has lain still for hours in an almost dissociated state as the design on his chest is infilled with the gentle strokes of the *marwat*, the long thin brush of human hair that is drawn across his skin. Experientially the transition from the quiet time of painting to the sharp moment of circumcision is dramatic. But he will remember and be reminded for the rest of his life of the painting that was given to him that day. Yolngu art is something of the moment but it is also a compendium of knowledge that can be acquired throughout a lifetime. Such knowledge is applied in innumerable contexts, in the form of paintings or dances used for particular purposes. The purpose may vary from the transport of the soul of the deceased or the transfer of ancestral power to demonstrations of rights in land. The knowledge contained in paintings in part explains why they can be used to interpret the form of the landscape or to communicate the creative actions of ancestral beings, and how it is that they mark clan identity in ways that can be used to support claims of precedence in political and social life. All of these can be the subject of exegesis and be included in glosses of the meanings of components of paintings. And yet at any moment the practice of art can create a sensation or a transcendent experience, individual or shared, that comes out of the phenomenological experience of the work itself and its effect on the senses, and that gives reality to an idea or a belief. In the Yolngu case, it might be the immanent presence of spiritual power in the world or a feeling of *communitas* at the culmination of a ritual.

Conclusions: seeing the light

The anthropological study of art as a form of action takes account of the multidimensional nature of sets of objects with properties that transcend conventional functional categories and divisions. Art is often deployed in social or religious contexts because it connects the cognitive and affective dimensions of human

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experience and facilitates complex ways of acting in the world. A work of art may encode meanings precisely, depicting an event, a sequence of action, a religious story, a particular person, or mythic being. Yet, the same work can also point towards ideas that cannot be so easily expressed, creating atmosphere, a sense of personality, or the state of a relationship. Art can 'communicate' through visual codes, the designs of distinctive forms of regalia that mark status, or the patterns that mark clan identity and more mundanely team membership. Visual properties can equally be used aesthetically to convey abstract concepts—time, space, atmosphere, chaos, order, and so on—and colours can be used to convey emotions or, slipping again into the mundane, the appropriate ambience for a kitchen or bathroom. The cognitive and the affective, and the semantic and aesthetic, while relatively autonomous, are in actuality co-present in the form of works of art. The stretching of meaning associated with artworks often happens because some things can be best expressed through aesthetic forms. Such ideas may be expressed through material forms that have a powerful impact on the human body, which create sensations that are almost inescapable—the sensation of the body being filled with light or becoming overwhelmingly heavy. The relationship between physical stimulus and bodily sensation is something all humans experience and art is in part the use of this shared experience to create meaning and to share emotions. In Yolngu art, the brilliance of the design is the ancestral power that is the vital force behind the world. However, similar effects in the context of other societies, while having some synergies, may have quite different significance and be stretching towards very different ideas. The particularities of the meaning of form in context need to be understood before the metaphysics can be appreciated.

While superficially there are elements in common between the approach I adopt to art and that of Alfred Gell's, in that both of us could be interpreted to adopt an action-oriented approach towards art, there are fundamental differences. Gell adopts an explicitly anthropological approach to art in which art as a category more or less disappears. My perspective is centred on art as a particular way of acting in the world that requires an interdisciplinary approach. Aesthetics and semantics are integral to my conception of art but are clearly not confined to art. What is contained under the rubric of art varies widely across cultures and time, but the family resemblance that underlies art objects creates synergies cross-culturally and a sense that certain kinds of things fit within the same broad category. Given the perspective I adopt, then I would advocate that art can profitably be analysed from a similar perspective irrespective of when and where it was produced. A focus on art as action requires that attention is paid to form, to understanding why that kind of object was produced for use in a particular cultural and social context, including of course its impact on and reception by others. And because many artworks are durable, a different set of questions needs to be posed as it is exchanged or traded and outlasts its maker by decades or millennia. On a priori grounds, the same broad range of questions and methods of analysis are

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going to be relevant to art whether it was produced by hunters in the Upper Palaeolithic, Buddhist wall painters of eighth-century China, Poole pottery painters, Yolngu bark painters, or contemporary graffiti artists. Those questions and methods are going to find that art encompasses many different kinds of things, since what is produced depends on the knowledge and technical accomplishment that goes into it and the purpose for which it is intended. But the archaeologist, the art historian, the anthropologist of art, while they may centre their research on different periods and societies and have access to different sources of data, should be involved in the same overall discourse.