
Book Reviews

Alfred Gell

1998 *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory.*
Oxford University Press
[xxiii + 271 pp.]

Most writing on the anthropology of art has, up until the present time, been largely classificatory. It typically outlines the content of a single culture-specific aesthetic system. This strategy has been advocated in an attempt to combat the ghettoization of ethnographic art. Alternatively, anthropologists have attempted to predicate an anthropological theory of art on the nature of either an aesthetic gaze or the semiotic value of art objects. Gell's book, rightly to my mind, calls these approaches into question, and in turn proposes a fundamentally different way of approaching, not just ethnographic art, but all art. This book seeks to construct an anthropological theory that is valid for both Australian aboriginal carvings and, for instance, the works of Picasso.

It is perhaps necessary, first of all, to mention the proviso contained in Nicholas Thomas's foreword to the book. *Art and Agency* represents Alfred Gell's concerted effort over a period of three weeks to delineate and integrate his thinking before his death from a terminal illness in 1997. The book is, therefore, incomplete, notably lacking a conclusion. As well, there are some technical errors in the use of citations. On the whole, however, my impression is that the argument flows fairly smoothly and its ability to deal with such a variety of issues is remarkable. The book is not an introductory text, in the sense that it builds upon previous work. It would be advisable for any reader to also consult some of Gell's past writing. It provides a grounding that this book sometimes takes for granted. Gell often plows through an idea on the assumption that everything has been dealt with before, leaving the reader slightly stunned. This is especially true for those who are not familiar with work on the anthropology of art from Britain. I think this factor precludes its reading at an undergraduate level, and some key works to consider before tackling this book would be Gell's (1992, 1996) earlier publications and a helpful summary provided in Ingold's (1996) volume *Key Debates in Anthropology* on the topic of aesthetics as a cross-cultural category.

Gell's main point is that the study of aesthetics in the anthropology of art is a waste of time. It says more about the anthropologist's near religious devotion to conceptions of Western fine art than any kind of indigenous category. Aesthetics is to the anthropological study of art what theology is to the sociological study of

religion. Theology describes the formal orthodoxy of a religion but may bear very little on how it is actually practiced. In similar fashion, aesthetics is a topic for art historians who want to explore the nature of a particular artwork. However, the task of the anthropologist is not to look at the artwork itself but towards the social relations surrounding its production, circulation and reception, in other words, its social life. Aesthetics could tell us, to use Gell's example, how the Yoruba evaluate a particular carving but not why they carve to begin with. This is the thrust of Gell's first chapter and largely reflects his earlier work. While lucidly argued, it does leave the reader somewhat dissatisfied. He, for instance, defines an anthropological theory as one that looks like other anthropological theories due to its basis on the study of social relations. This seems rather deterministic, in that all anthropological theories should look alike and not compete for the anthropologist's imagination.

The theory itself, however, provides a unique perspective on why artists create art. Gell thinks that the main purpose of art is the exercise of agency. The highly decorative shields used by some New Guinean tribes are not made to look 'beautiful' or 'aesthetically pleasing.' They are meant to scare one's enemy, to demonstrate the mastery of the wielder and create fear in the opponent. Art objects are a technology used to achieve certain ends. The receivers are enchanted by the technical virtuosity involved in the production of the object and, therefore, are beguiled into accepting the agency, the mastery, of the artist. In these terms, then, art becomes a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.

Building upon Marilyn Strathern's notion of the 'distributed person,' Gell argues in the second chapter that personhood is a function of agency. A person is someone who causes events to happen within the social milieu. Proceeding from this definition, a person does not, therefore, need to be a human being. What is important is that the intention to cause an event to happen is lodged within a thing. And in this case, that intention of social agency can be lodged within art objects. The third chapter of the book defines the variety of agent-patient relationships between social agents which revolve around an art object. Gell outlines four such possibilities: the artist, the index (art object), the prototype (the subject or model of the artwork), and the recipient (the viewer or art public). These various agents engage in a series of active-passive relationships throughout the social life of the art object. This section of the book is probably the most confusing. I believe his point comes across but the presentation of the material in the form of scientific-looking equations and complex diagrams is daunting. It would pay for the reader not to take the technical elucidation too seriously, and to pay more attention to the content of Gell's argument.

The next several chapters recapitulate Gell's earlier arguments on the nature of art. Chapters five and six concern his earlier notions of the enchanting and beguiling character of art works; their use-value instead of their abstract 'beauty.' Chapter seven extends this argument and is wholly original. It is an extended study of idolatry and, to preface this, Gell writes that our relationship to the best

of Western fine art (Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, for instance) approaches that of other cultures to their idols. We have, in other words, created the self-other distinction by discerning a special category for our idols, that of artworks. What follows is an attempt to elucidate the rational nature of idolatry and to explain it within our own terms. This is a theme in anthropology that goes back to Evans-Pritchard's work on Zande witchcraft. Gell focuses on the relational nature between idols and worshippers. Part of their relationship is the viewer of the idol installing agency within the idol. Therefore, the religious practitioner takes an active role over the passive idol, to create personhood within the idol, who then exercises religious agency over the practitioner. Thus, idolatry embodies many of the agent-patient relationships discussed in relation to art objects in the previous chapters.

Some debate in the anthropology of art has been with a key argument of art historians. This concerns the restrictive nature of indigenous style. Art historians have argued that while ethnographic art may be, by definition, art, it does not compare to Western fine art because of its style. Indigenous peoples, so the argument goes, are constrained by tradition, whilst the unfettered metropolitan artist is free to explore the boundaries of art production. Quite a few anthropologists have argued against this based on the biographies of individual indigenous artists. However, to this point I have not seen a concerted attempt to define just what this 'indigenous tradition' is which restricts the creativity of indigenous artists. Gell's eighth chapter deals with this issue, in that he attempts to delineate the artistic style of the Marquesan Islands in the nineteenth century. By establishing the linkages between tattooing, sculpture, and carving, Gell demonstrates that much of Marquesan art was a function of transformations of basic images. Within this constraint, Marquesan artists were able to construct a vast array of material. The principles that applied to tattooing were also employed in the construction of wooden clubs. Style is both restricting and creative because it limits the choices of the artist but also provides a field of possibilities for future work.

Gell's final chapter is an attempt by the author to draw together the totality of his work. He combines all of his previous work on tattooing, art, and time into an argument about human cognition. While a prevalent theme throughout the entire book, this chapter more than any other, reminds one of the writings of Levi-Strauss; it is nearly revelatory in its presentation but leaves the reader feeling that everything fits too perfectly. His basic argument, here, is that the corpus of an artist's work represents a distributed object through space and time. Specifically, when placed in sequence, each piece of artwork both reflects the artist's previous works but also portends those works yet to come. One's view of these "retentions" and "protentions" is relative to the individual work of art under consideration. Each object is, therefore, a stoppage in time in the development of the artist's corpus, the temporally distributed object. He goes on to demonstrate how this idea can be embodied in both the work of Marcel Duchamp but also Maori meeting houses.

In short, I think this book is profoundly important to the anthropology of art. Gell argues with verve and style an original approach to looking at art as a means of social agency rather than aesthetic appreciation. To my mind, he has effectively applied this to both ethnographic art and Western fine art, in many ways collapsing that distinction. This book is, therefore, a necessity for any anthropologist planning to tackle the problem of art.

References

Gell, A.

1992 The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology.
In *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*.
J. Coote and A. Shelton, eds. Pp. 40-67.
Oxford: Clarendon Press.

1996 Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps.
Journal of Material Culture 1(1):15-38.

Ingold, T.

1996 *Key Debates in Anthropology*.
London: Routledge.

Eric Henry

Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology
University of Oxford