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The Anthropology of Art

A Reader

Edited by

Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins

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The Anthropology of Art: A Reflection on its History and Contemporary Practice

Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins

The anthropology of art has entered an exciting stage in its history. It is in the process of moving from its place as a minority interest that most anthropologists could neglect towards a more central role in the discipline. In the past, disengagement from art as a subject of study reflected attitudes of anthropologists to material culture in general. It also sprang from a particular, overly narrow, Euro-American conception of art that made it, for some anthropologists, an uncomfortable field of study. The reasons why the narrowness of this definition inhibited anthropological analysis are both interesting and problematic, since historically anthropologists have adopted a critical stance to the presuppositions of their own cultures. For over a century, they have been at the forefront of debates over the definitions of religion, magic, kinship, gender, law and the economy, but art has, until recently, remained outside these definitional debates in anthropology at least. Yet in the context of Euro-American art practice the definition of art has been every bit as much contested as these other definitions, and indeed anthropological ways of thinking have often been influential in the debate about art while practitioners of anthropology have remained largely disengaged.

The discomfort that anthropologists have displayed over the inclusion of art among their data is shared with related disciplines such as archaeology, in which rock art remained for long divorced from other data, relegated to the concerns of a subdiscipline of committed, passionate and sometimes obsessive believers. Indeed it is only recently that it has begun to be accepted as a normal part of the archaeological record.[1] Being located on the margins has positive aspects. Studies of art have been interdisciplinary in their nature, engaging with ideas that come from outside the narrow confines of the core discipline, and often from outside the academy.

Art is associated almost equally with the two senses of the word "culture" – culture as a way of life or body of ideas and knowledge, and culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged. This may have been a factor in the discomfort that some

anthropologists felt about the term. Art in the first sense is associated with bodies of knowledge, technologies, and representational practices that provide insights into the whole lifeworld of a society. Art in the second sense has been seen as the product of a particular stage of Euro-American history. In this sense, art is seen as disconnected from society as a whole and overdetermined by its role in the class structure of Western capitalist society (e.g. Bourdieu 1984).[2] In this view art objects have become tokens or repositories of symbolic capital in which the ruling class invests its money to create value, and by which it reinforces its elite status; it is an interesting topic in the study of class based Western societies, but not necessarily as relevant in the rest of the world.

It is fundamentally important to separate out this aspect of art from more general features that make it a relevant category for cross-cultural analysis – including analysis of the phenomenon in its Western context. Its entanglement with recent European history and its articulation with Western value creation processes is an important dimension of art in the Euro-American social context, and worth investigating in its own right. Moreover, the role of art in contemporary Western society has an effect on global processes and so is a factor in cross-cultural investigations (see Myers 2002). Art as a category in Western society is more contested than is allowed for by the view that sees it simply as a commodity or an object of aesthetic contemplation. As Marcus and Myers write:

> By virtue of cross-cultural training and experience, most anthropologists encounter the category of "art" internal to our own culture, with suspicion and a sense of strangeness. Yet in this suspicion, anthropologists have also tried to reify the category and to simplify the complex internal dynamics of conflict within art worlds over issues of autonomy. Thus anthropologists' critical sensibilities of relativism, have largely failed to recognize modern art's own internal assault on "tradition" and challenge to boundaries. (Marcus and Myers 1995:6)

The synoptic view that emphasizes the unique characteristics of the Western category of art, with its Eurocentric biases, is thus itself often both a simplification and something of a stereotype, even though it is possible to find plenty of evidence for this view from art world discourse. This idea of art is really the conjunction of a number of themes: an emphasis on the autonomy of the aesthetic experience, where art consists of a set of objects set aside for aesthetic contemplation, with no other overt purpose; the development of a progressive evolutionary view of Western art history associated with an established canon that stretches forward from classical Greece to the present by way of the Renaissance; and the placing of an emphasis on individual creativity – if not genius – and a premium on innovation.[3] These achieve their most extreme and condensed form in the connoisseurship of the elite and the rhetoric of the auction market with its emphasis on uniqueness. The emphasis on individual creativity and the premium placed on originality – "the shock of the new" – resulted in the ascendancy of the avant-garde.

Many of these themes are shared by other systems. However, the Western themes co-exist in a particular way that has come to dominate the international art world. Contemporary artists from a wide range of cultural backgrounds have increased their engagement with the international art world and developed their own forms of avant-garde art. These may coincide with the historical Western concept, yet may also derive from indigenous concepts of innovation and rebellion. In its reaction against the Maost conception of politically controlled art (Mao 1967), the Chinese avant-garde art movement, for example, has engaged with contemporary Western

forms and concepts while also drawing upon the tradition of some literati painters who were noted for their rejection of prescribed styles and practices (Perkins 2001).[4] To create a more holistic view of cross-cultural art practices it has become important for the anthropology of art to move beyond its predominant focus on small-scale societies and address practices in art systems where there has been a long tradition of art historical practice and a culturally specific recognition of certain materials as art objects and certain individuals as artists.[5]

While certain characteristics of the contemporary Western art object provide a basis for differentiating contemporary Western art practice from that of many other societies, they must not be allowed to define the general category "art object." Nor need they do so: in themselves they connect with important general themes in anthropology which can provide cross-cultural insights and comparisons that overturn the essentialized uniqueness of the Western category. The making of collections, the accumulation of display goods, the integration of aesthetics within value creation processes, the articulation of cultural performance with political process and many other anthropological themes provide a basis for making comparisons between the "exotic" of the contemporary Euro-American art world and the art of other places and times.[6]

However distancing some anthropologists find the contemporary Euro-American concept of art or the art world(s) associated with it, that sense of distance cannot be the only explanation for the neglect of art by anthropologists for much of the recent history of the discipline. Some other reasons are discussed below.

From Inclusion to Exclusion: Anthropology and Art in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries

The idea of art in European culture has itself been subject to a continuous process of change. The conception of art in the mid-nineteenth century was very different to what it subsequently became under the influence of modernism. Art and material culture were an integral part of nineteenth-century anthropology. As a discipline, anthropology developed hand in hand with the cabinets of curiosity, with antiquarianism, and with the widening of European horizons following the Enlightenment. It was caught up with a more general interest in the exoticism of Otherness, and found itself in a constant state of tension between a comparative perspective that acknowledged a common humanity in all places and times and a teleological evolutionary tendency that saw European civilization as developing out of a progressive transformation of earlier societies. The classificatory projects of institutions like the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford captured this tension – recognizing common categories while ordering things and societies in evolutionary sequences. The typological method in British anthropology involved the identification of traits associated with particular cultures and levels of civilization, and artifacts and customary practices were equally components of those typological sets.[7] Art was included with other material culture objects in the evolutionary schema developed by anthropologists such as Pitt Rivers (1906), Tylor (1871, 1878),[8] and Frazer (1925). The most perfect simplification of this argument is Pitt Rivers's diagrammatic representation of the origin of artifacts of different types from the form of a simple stick (figure I.1).[9] He represents artifacts almost as if they reproduced biologically, with successions of minor mutations eventually resulting in differentiation and the production of more complex objects. It is significant that he chose Australian Aboriginal artifacts as the

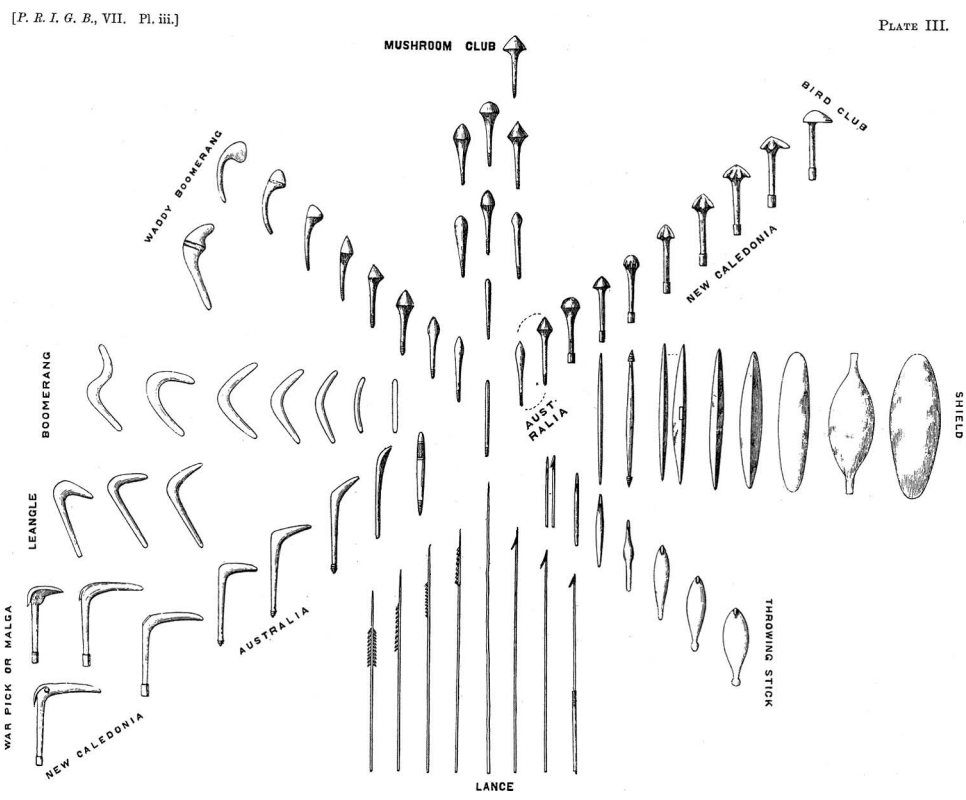

Figure I. 1 This diagram by General Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers 1875, was first produced as plate iii in his article "On the Evolution of culture," *Proceedings of the Royal Institute of Great Britain* VII:20–44. The figure was titled "Clubs, boomerangs, shields and lances" and illustrates the evolution of weapons of these types from a simple throwing stick shown in the center of the diagram. The diagram captures the essence of Pitt Rivers's theory of the development of material culture objects from the simple to the complex as the result of a cumulative process – analogous to Darwinian evolution

basis for his model since Aborigines for long remained the exemplar of "primitive" societies – those that could be taken to represent earlier stages of human cultural evolution. While today Pitt Rivers' model appears simplistic in the extreme, the questions posed by observable patterns in the data remain interesting.

To understand the problematic that drove evolutionary writers on art it is necessary to enter a mind set in which innovation is seen to be a rare component of human cultures, in which most motifs and styles of art are regarded as typically of long duration, in which copying was seen as integral to art practice, in which there were thought to be objective criteria for assessing representations either as decorative forms or as realistic representations of a world out there. The problems that needed to be tackled were: where did the idea or form of particular designs come from, and, on the other hand, how did techniques of realistic representation evolve?

Interestingly, the premises underlying those questions were challenged by modernism, which in turn gained much of its energy from reflecting on the very same set of artifacts that the anthropologists were analyzing. Ironically, modernism saw the diversity of cultural forms as a license for innovation. This was often associated with a rhetoric of "freeing" the artists from the constraints of tradition. Modernism

viewed the inspirational works of "primitive art" as exemplars of a universal aesthetic yet simultaneously built in its own assumptions to explain the liberating nature of their forms: primitive art expressed the fundamental, primeval psychic energy of man, unconstrained by the academic tradition – it could be connected to the art of children and the insane. This tension between the modernist avant-garde approach to the arts of other cultures and the anthropological approach remains a continuing theme of debates over the interpretation and exhibition of art. While the emphasis of anthropology has long moved away from evolutionism, the tension remains between the avant-garde view that art speaks for itself and is open to universalistic interpretation, and an anthropological perspective, which requires an indigenous interpretative context.

The formal analyses of British anthropologists such as Haddon (1894; Haddon and Start 1936) and Balfour (1888, 1893a) articulated with the concerns of evolutionary theorists, but it could be argued that their method of analyzing sequences over time was relatively independent of the evolutionary hypotheses that the sequences were sometimes used to support. Their concern to trace the development of decorative motifs over time was connected to the general problematics of art history and antiquarian archaeology. In the archaeological record, motifs were seen to succeed each other over time and to have spread across boundaries, reflecting the relationships between groups.[10] The problem with the method was that the sequences themselves became proof of the evolutionary theory that lay behind them, giving temporal direction to the sequences, from simple to complex, or from figurative to abstract.[11]

In the USA, the pioneering anthropologist of art Franz Boas was equally interested in problems of form in his analyses of non-European art. He certainly saw studies of form in art as having the potential to reveal historical patterns and relationships between groups, but was fundamentally opposed to simple evolutionary theories. He begins his book on *Primitive Art* (1927) by noting that "the treatment given to the subject is based on two principles that, I believe, should guide all investigations of life among primitive people: one the fundamental sameness of mental processes in all races and in all cultural forms of the present day; the other the consideration of every cultural phenomenon as the result of historical happenings" (Boas 1927:1).

There was a close association between anthropology and museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and many anthropologists were also among the builders of the great ethnographic collections of institutions such as the Smithsonian, the Peabody, the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, and the Berlin Museum.[12] Anthropologists working under the auspices of the American Bureau of Ethnology and the parallel Boasian tradition made documented collections that have subsequently become a major resource in the anthropology of art, and produce rich ethnographies of art. The Australian ethnographies of Spencer and Gillen (1904, 1927) were rich in their coverage of the material culture and ceremonial performance of Australian Aboriginal societies. Spencer who, under the influence of Frazer, could never allow himself to refer to Aboriginal religion, nevertheless wrote in very positive terms about their "art."[13] Detailed accounts and recordings of art and material culture were also made by European anthropologists such as Nordenskiöld (1973 [1893], 1930), von den Steinen (1969 [1925]), and others.

However, as anthropology moved into the twentieth century a breach began to develop between academic anthropology and museum anthropology in both Britain

and the USA. In Britain, evolutionary theory began to come in for strong criticism. The characterization of societies in terms of traits, and their ranking according to typologies based on the movement from simple to complex forms were seen as an impoverished theory based on inadequate method. Evolutionary theory, it was argued, failed to place cultural traits in the context of societies taken as a whole. It failed to show the interrelationship between components in the present, and failed to demonstrate the truth of its hypotheses on the basis of the data available.

There was simultaneously a methodological shift away from museum based studies and inventories of customs produced by missionaries, traders and government officials, towards studies based on long-term field research. Longer-term fieldwork revealed the relationship between different elements of a society as it was at a particular point in time and opened richer veins of sociological data.

There was no reason, a priori, why the study of art and material culture could not benefit from fieldwork based studies. However, in Britain the fieldwork "revolution" became associated with a particular theoretical shift in anthropology towards the structural functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown (1952, 1977) and Malinowski (1922, 1979). Radcliffe-Brown's "comparative science of society"[14] had a profound effect on developments in British social anthropology. In his concern to create a space for anthropology that differentiated it from surrounding disciplines he created an anthropology that centered on synchronic studies of social organization and the comparative study of social structures. He distanced anthropology from history, from psychology, and, in part as a reaction to developing trends in American anthropology, from culture. In emphasizing a synchronic study of human society he effectively buried the data of the evolutionists and their problematic. The opposition to psychology reinforced the social over the individual and behavior over emotions, excluding areas where the study of art has the potential to make a major contribution. In the minds of the new theorists the study of material culture was too closely associated with the more simplistic aspects of evolutionary theory and not central to the shifting concerns of the discipline.[15] Thus material culture – and art – became separated from the mainstream of British social anthropology. Objects were confined in the museum basements and little studied. This situation remained true of British anthropology until the 1960s – indeed the neglect of art and material culture was at its most profound just before the tables turned and art again became an important subject of anthropological writing. In Europe anthropology underwent a similar process of separation from the museum in those countries, such as Holland and France, that developed parallel fieldwork traditions.

In American anthropology the history has been a little different, though characterized by similar periods of neglect. Long-term fieldwork was associated with the development of the Bureau of American Ethnology and Boasian anthropology, which though it included a critique of evolutionism was certainly not a precursor to functionalism. Anthropology developed a little more holistically in the USA than in Britain. The four-field approach to anthropology (socio-cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics) allowed material culture studies to continue as a subject wedged between archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology. It is even possible to see in American anthropology a long-term influence from culture historical approaches to art. Marcus and Myers argue for recognition of the long-term impact of those approaches on American anthropology. For example, they note the influence of European art theories on the anthropology of

Boas and his students Kroeber, Sapir, and Benedict, in particular through the concepts of pattern and style in culture (Marcus and Myers 1995:11 ff.).[16] Nonetheless, relatively few studies of art were produced by American anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century. And archaeology, concerned with its own disciplinary independence, tended to distance itself from the museum based study of material culture objects and the analysis of artifacts in living societies.

The distancing of material culture studies and art from the mainstream of anthropology created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Social anthropologists failed to take advantage of a major potential source of data, and museum anthropologists failed to connect the objects in their collections with the societies that produced them. Museum anthropology became disconnected from the main concerns of the discipline and no longer made a significant contribution to contemporary debates. Museum collections continued to be built through short-term field expeditions or through connections with government officials and missionaries. Ironically, museum anthropologists were at least as suspicious of the term "art" as were social anthropologists. Museum anthropology, quite correctly, was concerned to develop classifications of material culture that were as culturally neutral as possible. The typological classifications of the Pitt Rivers Museum, for example, further developed by Henry Balfour (1893b, 1904), Penniman (1953, 1965: 153 ff.), and Beatrice Blackwood (1970), had no place for art. Art was de-emphasized in museum exhibitions in favor of more general exhibitions of material culture and dioramas of daily life.

Many museum anthropologists viewed the category of art with as much suspicion as did other anthropologists. The reasons are complex, and they have not been fully researched. Factors include internal relations within museums, anthropological assumptions and the entanglement of indigenous art with the art market. In the museum world the term "art" tended to be associated with the more highly valued collections from classical civilizations whose objects were part of European heritage. The arts of classical civilizations were positioned in a trajectory that led to European fine art and were associated with the connoisseurship and value creation processes of the art market. The emphasis on the dating, appreciating, appraising and authenticating of classical antiquities created a category of objects removed from the primary concerns of ethnographic collections, whose curators emphasized more the cultural significance of objects. While many individual researchers transcended this divide, the opposition between art and ethnography and its entanglement with the categorization of collections as markers of civilization had a major impact on museum anthropology.

Those objects designated as "art" were often distanced from their cultural context and evaluated according to Western criteria and in relation to Western categories. Ethnographic objects were considered prior, in an evolutionary sense, to the great "art" traditions of Western civilization. If they were art, they were "primitive art." As material culture objects they were viewed as having functional roles in their producing societies that had nothing to do with the categories established by Western art history. Thus art came to be viewed as a Western category with no equivalence in most societies. Where it encompassed the works of other cultures it appropriated them and subordinated them to the history of Euro-American art. The art market appeared to be a party to the presuppositions of Western art history, categorizing certain objects as primitive art. Yet it was also engaged in a value creation process that shifted some objects from the artifact to art category (these issues are well covered by Price 2001 and Errington 1998).

Some ethnographic museum curators were offended by the activities of the art market. In their view it ripped objects out of their indigenous category as types of functioning artifact and placed them on the pedestal of art. They found themselves in competition with private collectors through the auction houses. Art moved objects beyond the acquisition budgets of the ethnographic museums and placed them in the hands of private collectors, or edged them towards the galleries of the art museums, who in turn viewed them in an ambivalent light.

In this period, which lasted until the 1960s, anthropologists in general saw art as an artificial category. It took the objects they studied as ritual objects, functional artifacts, prestige items or markers of status and placed them on a pedestal for aesthetic contemplation. The art dimension of the object seemed to be epiphenomenal – at worst the projection of European aesthetic values onto objects produced in quite different contexts for quite different purposes. This view became deeply embedded in the discipline. For example, it may in part explain the influence of Bourdieu's approach to art which does not require detailed attention to artistic process, form or creativity.[17] One might argue that a professional philistinism, a lack of belief in art as an area of significant human activity influenced anthropologists to neglect it. The ideology of "art for art's sake" that so restricted interpretations of Paleolithic art may well have reflected the general opinions of a particular class in Western society to which most anthropologists belonged. The concept of high art was so internalized by anthropologists, as part of their own cultural experience, that they could not adopt a more culturally neutral way of viewing it. On the one hand, they were socialized into the same aesthetic discourse as other members of their professional class while, on the other hand, they were sceptical about the applicability of the concept of art cross-culturally. It is ironic that Radcliffe-Brown's (1927) only essay on art concerned the art of the Australian modernist Margaret Preston, who used Indigenous Australian motifs in her paintings and was inspired by Aboriginal aesthetics – a topic that Radcliffe-Brown the anthropologist wrote nothing about!

The Exceptions

While the neglect of art was general among anthropologists there were a number of exceptional studies. Some social anthropologists such as Raymond Firth (1979) Melville Herskovits (1934, 1938, 1959 and 1966) and Robert Redfield (1959) maintained a holistic vision of anthropology in which art was an integral component. Firth characteristically managed to appreciate the liberating force of modernism in Western art while drawing lessons from modernism for the analysis of non-European art, without forgoing his anthropological relativism. It is always difficult to enter particular historical moments – especially moments of significant change – and capture the way in which the world appeared to people living through those times. The impact of modernism and the challenge of primitive art are almost unrecoverable experiences. Firth provides a glimpse of the excitement, of exposure to exotic forms when he writes: "the admission into the graphic and plastic arts of distortion, of change of form from the proportions given by ordinary vision, came as a liberating influence." And then the anthropologist takes over as he continues:

> It was significant not only for an appreciation of the contemporary Western art, but also for a clearer understanding of much medieval and exotic art. Like Romanesque painting and sculpture which have long captured my interest, the painting and sculpture which anthropologists encountered in exotic societies could be regarded, not as a product of imperfect vision, technical crudity,

> or blind adherence to tradition, but as works of art in their own right, to be judged as expressions of artists' original conceptions in the light of their cultural endowment. (Firth 1992:19)

In the USA, Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas, led the study of African and African American art. In Britain colonial anthropologists such as Mills (1926, 1937) and Rattray (1954) produced important regional ethnographies of art. The school of French anthropologists who emerged around Marcel Griaule and later Germaine Dieterlen made a major contribution to the study of African art and were pioneers of visual anthropology.[18] In Belgium there were Luc de Heusch (1958, 1972, 1982) and Daniel Biebuyck (1969, 1973). In Australia Ronald Berndt was a passionate advocate for an anthropology of art, and the amateur anthropologist Charles Mountford made important documented collections.[19] And some museum based anthropologists such a William Fagg (1968, 1970, 1981, 1982) of the British Museum were unafraid to make art the central theme of their research.

However, more often than not, studies of art were absent where they might have been expected. Malinowski's (1922) study of the Kula played down the richness of the performances and the pageantry of the voyages and the exchanges that surrounded them, produced limited insights into the abundant art of the Kula voyages and overlooked the spectacle of the women's skirts.[20] Ironically it was the material dimension of the Kula that stimulated theoretical discourse from the beginning, in Mauss's (1950) analysis of the gift and the subsequent discourse in anthropology over exchange. But it was not until the late 1960s, beginning with Weiner's (1977) studies in the Massim that aesthetics, performance and material culture became integral to the research process and a broader understanding of the role of material culture in the processes of exchange and value creation began to emerge.[21] And it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that the first major studies of Trobriand Island art were undertaken (Scoditti 1990; Campbell 2002).

A Revival of Interest

The 1960s saw a strong renewal of interest in art among anthropologists. It sprang from two sources – from changes in the research agenda of anthropology and from the fact that the current of Western art and art theory began to flow more in the direction of anthropological thinking. In neither case were these movements general but they helped to create an environment in which the anthropology of art could begin to grow and find new niches, both within the discipline itself and in the wider art world.

Anthropology as a discipline grew rapidly after World War II and this allowed or even encouraged new specializations. In Britain there was a move away from the focus on social relations and the analysis of social structure to an increased concern with myth, religion, and ritual. The anthropology of art received support from the renewed interest in symbolism, which in turn articulated with structuralist, semiotic and linguistic approaches to culture viewed as a system of meaning. Similar changes occurred in American anthropology, which already had an advantage in its diversity and the number of its practitioners.

The 1960s also saw the growth of interest in visual anthropology, a renewed interest in material culture and the development of an anthropological archaeology. These were synergistic with developments in the anthropology of art if relatively independent of it. Often there were crossovers in theory and method in these disciplines which were concerned with the cultural dimensions of things (Kubler 1962, 1979).

The anthropology of art benefited particularly from the development of theoretical interest in two areas – symbolism and exchange. Symbolic anthropology was concerned equally with the semantic aspects of symbolism and with the effectiveness of those symbols in ritual contexts – with linking the intentional aspects of ritual with the performative. Since "art" objects – body paintings, sacred objects, masks – were often integral to ritual performances they entered into the study of ritual and symbolism (see e.g. Forge 1973, 1979; Fernandez 1982, 1986; Turner 1973, 1986; Witherspoon 1977; and Munn 1973, 1986).

Exchange theory was closely connected to studies of symbolism. Exchange is one of the ways in which value is created, and material objects are both expressions of value and objects which in themselves gain in value through processes of exchange. Objects such as Kula valuables are integral to exchange systems and in many societies sacred objects, body paintings and designs add to the prestige and power of the groups or individuals controlling them. The role that objects played in these processes became a topic of increasing interest (see e.g. Gregory 1982; Munn 1986). Exchange theory and symbolic anthropology influenced the discourse over the nature of persons and things, in the context of their interrelationships. This became a central theme of anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s.

From the 1970s on there was also an increasing emphasis on topics such as the emotions, gender, the body, space and time. Art, broadly defined, often provided a major source of information. Sculptures and paintings offer insights into systems of representation (Morphy 1991; Taylor 1996), the aesthetics of the body (Boone 1986), value creating processes (Munn 1986; Gell 1992), social memory (Küchler 2002), the demarcation of space (Blier 1987) and so on. Song and drama provide rich sources of information on the poetics of culture (Feld 1982), the world of feeling, and reflective and introspective dimensions of culture as well as exemplifying performativity (Kratz 1994).[22]

Material culture objects were no longer regarded as passive; they began to be seen as integral to the processes of reproducing social relations and of developing affective relations with the world – "art as a way of doing, a way of behaving as a member of society, having as its primary goal the creation of a product or effect of a particular kind" (D'Azevedo 1973:7). Through their material possessions people produce an image of themselves in the world, and these material possessions also operate to create the stage on which people lead their daily lives – they are markers of status, gender relations and so on. We would argue that many studies of the era concerned failed to explore sufficiently the material dimensions of objects and missed the opportunity to use them as a truly independent source of data. Nevertheless, they created an environment in which the anthropology of art could develop.

Modernism and the Anthropology of Art

Changes in the Western art world also resulted in a more serious engagement with anthropology. The concept of art that developed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries centered on the aestheticized object separated from the rest of life. As far as anthropology was concerned, this was an alien view. However, modernism also created the groundwork for a more positive and dynamic relationship between anthropology and art.

The rise of anthropology and the development of modernism in art were related, even though anthropologists neglected to study art either in their own society or in the non-European societies that were the primary focus of their research. For the practitioners of modern art in the early years of the twentieth century, the encounter with the arts of Africa and Oceania was a liberating experience. Although the critique of primitivism has rightly emphasized the appropriative nature of this aspect of modernism, the aesthetic shifts associated with the widening of the European tradition played an important role in awakening an appreciation of non-European art and in creating spaces for its exhibition. As Firth's statement (above) suggests, the advent of modernism had the potential to disturb the anthropologists' preconceptions about what art was, so that they could begin to see the analytic potential of the art of the societies they studied.

Anthropology's articulation with modernism has been long-term, and it is only recently that anthropologists have become fully aware of the complexities of that relationship. The challenge of anthropology to the contemporary Euro-American art world, only now being explicitly articulated, is twofold: it gives agency to the artist and asserts that cultural context plays an important part in the appreciation of art. Thus it problematizes the universalistic assumption behind the modernist enterprise. In turn the challenge for anthropology has been to open up its own interpretative practice to the aesthetic and affective dimension of objects.

Marcus and Myers (1995) draw attention to the fact both contemporary art and anthropology have "culture as [their] object." This is an interesting idea. Certainly one of the main trends in late twentieth-century modernism has been the emphasis on different forms of conceptual art in which the idea is the object. Art has increasingly become part of cultural commentary and of political discourse, involving a reflexive critique of the artist's own society. This synergy with anthropology's reflexive aspect and its focus on culture may be the reason why anthropology and ethnography have recently begun to figure in Euro-American art discourse and practice;[23] museums and their ethnographic collections have become installation sites and a springboard for cross-cultural dialogue among artists.

The present conversation between art and anthropology[24] reveals the dynamic, changing and complex nature of the Western art category as well as saying something about the increasing engagement of anthropology in popular discourse, and cautions against long-term generalizations about the relationship between the two.

An Anthropological Definition of Art

So far, we have skirted around two issues that are central to an anthropology of art – the definition of art and what characterizes an anthropological approach to art. The two are related – an anthropological definition of art is going to be influenced by the nature of anthropology itself. As a cross-cultural discipline, its definition of categories is affected by the desire to reduce cultural bias; the objective is to make categories as broadly applicable as possible without becoming meaningless. Those categories form part of an evolving and often implicit disciplinary metalanguage. Yet we would also argue that the definition of an artwork cannot come solely from within the discipline. Anthropology is the study of human societies and hence anthropological categories must be based in the real worlds in which people – including anthropologists – exist. Historically, anthropology's metalanguage has always been biased by

its Western origins and our definition of art is no exception. That bias needs to be acknowledged and taken into account in the construction of the definition. In turn this process of revision may challenge and influence the categorical definitions of the anthropologists' own societies. In this regard we take a very different approach from Gell who eschews a definition of art.[25]

We will use a working definition of art that one of us developed previously: "art objects are ones with aesthetic and/or semantic attributes (but in most cases both), that are used for representational or presentational purposes" (Morphy 1994:655). The definition is not intended to be exclusive; rather, it indicates the kind of objects that anthropologists are usually referring to when they focus on "art objects." Components of the definition are likely to be found in most anthropologists' writing about art. To Boas "the very existence of song, dance, painting and sculpture among all the tribes known to us is proof of the craving to produce things that are felt as satisfying through their form, and [of the] capability of man to enjoy them" (1927:9). Boas also connected the form of art to meaning and saw the interaction between the two as contributing to the aesthetic effect:

> The emotions may not be stimulated by the form alone but by the close associations that exist between form and ideas held by the people. When forms convey meaning, because they recall past experiences or because they act as symbols, a new element is added to enjoyment. The form and its meaning combine to elevate the mind above the indifferent emotional state of everyday life. (Boas 1927:12)

Our position is that the anthropology of art is not simply the study of those objects that have been classified as art objects by Western art history or by the international art market. Nor is art an arbitrary category of objects defined by a particular anthropological theory; rather, art making is a particular kind of human activity that involves both the creativity of the producer and the capacity of others to respond to and use art objects, or to use objects as art.[26] We acknowledge that there are good arguments for deconstructing the art category and replacing it with more specific concepts such as depiction, representation, aesthetics, and so on, all of which are relevant to some or all of the objects we include under the rubric of art. We also acknowledge that the study of art can be nested within an anthropology of material culture (see Miller 2005 for a recent approach to materiality) and that the dividing lines between art and non-art within that category are often fine and not always relevant. Our response is to recognize that the category of art is fuzzy, involving a series of overlapping polythetic sets, which contain objects that differ widely in their form and effects. However, the narrower terms that are used to replace art as a general concept are often complementary to one another and they all seem to be drawn together in discourse that surrounds the objects that are usually designated art objects. And clearly we think that the more general concept of art is relevant to understanding the role of such objects in human social life. Otherwise we would not produce a reader on the anthropology of art!

It could be argued that we have narrowed the topic down too much by focusing on material objects, and that our separation of the visual arts from dance and music follows a categorization from Western art history that is inappropriate for cross-cultural analysis. But we suggest that our definition of art applies with little modification across different media of communication. Indeed we would argue that art making as a concept can be applied across media and that this strengthens our argument for its existence as a particular kind of human action. The justification for

focusing primarily on the visual arts in this collection is that visual arts have properties of affect and performance that distinguish them from song, music, dance and other modes of performance and that require different skills and techniques and involve different senses.[27] But visual art is often produced as part of a performance that equally involves other media, or if it occurs separately it cross-refers to artistic practice in other media. Anthropological analysis must involve an understanding of how the parts contribute to the whole, and what makes an object an art object may only be determined by analysis across media and across contexts. Anthropology must also be open to classifications of the phenomenal world that do not correspond to Western categories.

The sets of objects that fall within the category of art object have to be determined in each particular case in the context of the society concerned. While there may be an overlap in the classifications employed by different cultures, it cannot be presumed. The anthropological category is an analytic one and will not necessarily conform to any category explicitly recognized by a particular society.[28] The point so often raised, that there is "no word for art" in the society concerned, is not an argument against an analytic category of art (see, for example, Perkins 2005).[29]

It is, however, relevant to ask what sets of terms are applied within the society to the sets of objects that might be encompassed within the category art. The analysis of the vocabulary employed may be relevant to determining whether the label art can be appropriately applied. If these objects are thought of first in their functional sense (such as fish hooks used in physical or magical ways), it does not follow that they lack qualities that overlap with and are considerably relevant to the category "art," anthropologically defined. The lack of a specific word is often an indication of the production and reception of imagery, performances, and so on, as integrally connected to other aspects of life (e.g. catching fish). The rationale for continuing to pursue the anthropology of "art" is threefold. First, art is a term that, for better or worse, has been either adopted or recognized on a nearly global scale. Second, art describes a range of thoughts and practices that employ creativity in the production of expressive culture, regardless of whether that production adheres to prescribed forms or embodies individual innovation. Third, the anthropology of art encompasses the history of this concept in cross-cultural encounters and the contemporary conditions that are the inheritance of this history. The application of expressive, aesthetic, evaluative terms to the objects concerned would on a priori grounds be good evidence that they fit into the cross-cultural category as we have defined it. However, the use of aesthetic criteria is not a necessary and sufficient condition.

The classification of works as art by the Western art world is not a relevant criterion for defining the category of non-Western arts, even if there is an overlap in the works that might be included. The criteria used to include works from non-Western societies under the European rubric of art are of more relevance to the history of Western art than they are to understanding the significance of those objects in their own cultural contexts. The Western category of art has been expanding, selectively swallowing up the arts of other cultures. For much of the twentieth century the categorization of non-European art as "primitive art" predominated. The recognition of the qualitative aspects of African and Oceanic objects reflected in part the engagement of European artists with these objects at the end of the nineteenth and turn of the twentieth centuries.

The dominant paradigm for exhibiting primitive art, until recently, subordinated it to the influence of the works on Euro-American artists and viewed the works as objects of aesthetic contemplation independent of their cultural context. In the 1935 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *African Negro Art*, the curator James Johnson Sweeney "felt that if African art was displayed in the same manner as European and American sculpture, viewers would evaluate it using the same aesthetic criteria" (cited in Webb 1995:32–3). First Nations art in Canada had received similar treatment in a 1927 exhibition at the National Gallery. As with a later exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – the subject of many of the articles in the Primitivism section of this volume – this exhibition presented West Coast Native works primarily as objects that had inspired non-Native Canadian artists. The purpose of this exhibition was, according to then Director, Eric Brown, "to mingle for the first time the art works of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists in an endeavour to analyse their relationships to one another, if such exist, and particularly to enable this primitive and interesting art to take a definite place as one of the most valuable of Canada's artistic productions."[30]

The European art world selected out objects that fitted within its own broad categories of sculpture and painting. These were portable and transportable works that could be exhibited in similar ways to their European equivalents. The set of objects relevant for analyzing art in Africa, Native America, or Aboriginal Australia is unlikely to be the same as the set selected out for inclusion in the Western category of art. It must be borne in mind, however, that if the objective of anthropology is partly to alter Western ways of thinking about different cultures, an anthropologically informed Western category of Aboriginal or African art (Yoruba art, San art and so on) is potentially realizable.

We agree with Gell (1992) that a degree of aesthetic agnosticism is required when analyzing aesthetics cross-culturally; however we do not go as far as he does in ruling aesthetics to be outside the province of an anthropology of art. It is vital not to presume how a particular object is interpreted on the basis of our own aesthetic judgements. An aesthetic response involves a physical, emotional and/or cognitive response to qualitative attributes of the form of an object. We would argue that there is a cross-cultural dimension to aesthetics and that some perceptions and even interpretations may be shared widely, but that this is a matter to be demonstrated in the particular case on the basis of relevant ethnography. In a sense there is a double problem of interpretation. We have to establish the quality of the aesthetic effect and then place it within an interpretative context to determine its meaning – how it is felt – in the context of the producing society. None of these qualifications suggests that we cannot explore the aesthetic dimension of these objects, and indeed in many parts of his analysis Gell does precisely this. He tends to equate the aesthetic with beauty and pleasure. Both of these are important components of aesthetic discourse, but the aesthetic dimension must also encompass their opposites – feelings of discomfort, the idea of ugliness and the potential for pain.

Works of art must first be defined in relation to particular traditions and in their social and cultural context. It may be that the concept of art is not useful in the analysis of the objects of some societies. It is certainly the case that an anthropological study of a particular topic, for example ritual, is likely to include objects that are non-art objects as well as those that can be usefully defined as art. Indeed there is no reason why the category art should be used at all in analyzing ritual objects, so long

as the aesthetic attributes of the objects are considered when relevant, that is, when their aesthetic effect is part of the reason why the event in which they partake is thought to be ritually powerful. One might conclude from this, indeed, that rather than developing an anthropology of art anthropologists should simply be aware of the semantic and aesthetic dimensions of objects.

We are partly in agreement with this notion. There is no doubt that, as anthropologists from Boas to Coote (1992) have noted, the aesthetic dimension applies to the natural world as well as to cultural products.[31] One might argue that the concept of art is useful simply as a flag to remind anthropologists not to neglect this dimension of an object in their analysis. However art does not inhere simply in the aesthetic dimension of objects. It categorizes certain kinds of object and a certain way of acting in the world that shows common elements cross-culturally. The category differentiates art objects from other objects, even if the boundaries of the category are fuzzy around the edges.

Anthropological Approaches to Art or Anthropological Theories of Art

What is distinctive about an anthropological approach or rather anthropological approaches to art, apart from the cross-cultural definition of art itself? The easy answer is that the anthropological approach to art is as diverse as the discipline itself. There is no anthropological theory of art that is not also part of more general theory (see Layton 1991 for one approach to the discipline and Van Damme for a survey of "anthropologies" of art). However it is possible to make certain generalizations about an anthropological approach that most anthropologists would find uncontroversial. An anthropological approach to art is one that places it in the context of its producing society. The art of a particular society has to be understood initially in relation its place in the society where it was produced, rather than in relation to how members of another society might understand it. Subsequently it might be interpreted further in relation to some general propositions about the human condition or according to a comparative model of human societies. But initially it needs to be placed in its ethnographic context.

Once it is placed in its context we have to discover what kind of thing art is before we can begin to analyze it and see how it in turn contributes to the context in which it occurs. Anthropology is a dialogic discipline precisely because of its holistic approach. Analyzing what kind of object a work of art is may be a prerequisite to understanding its role or effect in a ritual performance. It is possible that its semantic density may be an important factor, or its aesthetic effect, or its historic significance to participants; there may be any number of factors acting separately or in conjunction. Analysis of the object contributes to an understanding and definition of context, and this in turn provides relevant information about the object itself.

For these reasons we do not think that there is any single anthropological theory of art. Since art is an encompassing category, it includes objects of very many different types that are incorporated in contexts in different ways. In some cases the semantic aspects of the object may be of central relevance to the way it functions. In other cases its expressive or aesthetic properties may be central. While some art systems encode meanings in almost language-like ways, in other cases meaning operates at a more general level. In most cases the same artworks in context can be approached from a variety of different perspectives, all of which are relevant to understanding

some aspect of their form or significance. As O'Hanlon (1995:832) points out it is important "to recognise the multidimensionality of art" where the semantic, aesthetic, affective and purposive dimensions all apply to the same object or event.

Throughout its history anthropology has returned to the debate about whether the central focus of the subject is social relations or culture. This debate or chasm has affected the anthropology of art at various times and, as we suggested in the first section of this introduction, discomfort with a particular conception of culture may have contributed to the neglect of art by structural functionalists. Our simple – perhaps even simplistic – counter to this divide is to argue that it is equally important to study the social and the cultural aspects of art. Art is often integral to social relationships as Gell (1998) emphasizes, and no anthropological study of art would be complete if its social, political, and economic dimensions were neglected. However art is also closely associated with the ideational aspects of society and with the bodies of knowledge associated with those ideas. Here it enters the realm of culture. Its study requires attention to formal aspects of the art in order to answer certain questions: how does art convey meaning, how does it affect its audience, how does it represent subject matter, is it viewed as a manifestation of a God or spirit or as the genius of a creative individual? These questions link form to content. Too often, purely sociological theories of art neglect details of the form of objects. They consider them to be irrelevant or epiphenomenal to the way art works – to its place in the market or its value as a symbol of power. These can be termed "black box" theories of art in which every object – in formal terms – may as well consist of an empty and featureless black box. While the neglect of form may be adequate for certain analyses, it is likely to provide only a partial understanding of the role of art objects in social life.

The study of art encourages anthropologists to deal with the temporality of cultural processes, to connect the experiential dimension of culture, the immediacy of performance with longer-term and more general processes. Works of art have different durations. Some, such as a spectacular revelatory event in a performance, may be over in a matter of seconds, even if the impact on participants endures for a lifetime. Others – a mask or a body painting for example – may be present for a few hours until they are removed or wear away. Others may be part of a permanent structure – such as a temple icon, added to or modified, at times dressed, but ever present in place. Consider, for example, the case of the Zuni *Ahayu:da* (War God) that must be allowed to decay in order to release its dangerous power back into the environment. This stands in direct opposition to museums' efforts at preservation and has thus been used as a central argument in repatriation claims (Clifford ch. 9; Tedlock 1995). The different durations of presence will affect how such works are seen, how people relate to them over time, how they can be used in knowledge transmission, how they can be learned, and so on. The analysis of their form must take these factors into account – the work of art is not simply the object itself but the whole context in which it is produced, seen and used.

There is an added complication. The experience of an artwork is not necessarily confined to a single event or context. Different dimensions of the work may come into play over time as a result of multiple exposure or evocations of the memory of form. Yolngu paintings, for example, are inscribed on the bodies of initiates prior to their circumcision; they seldom last unmodified for more than a day after they are finished, and the boys receive little instruction as to the meaning of the designs. The immediate

impact of the painting is intense; its painting on the body is part of a life changing experience. A boy lies still for hours while the fine cross-hatched lines are painted across his chest with a brush of human hair, and he will remember the event for the rest of his life. For his adult relatives the fine painting marks his change of status from boy to man; it is a symbol of pride and a sign of his connection to the ancestral world. Paintings are experienced as spiritually powerful objects, and the shimmering brilliance of the design as it appears on the boy's chest as he is carried on the shoulders of his mother's brothers to the place of circumcision is a sign of this ancestral presence. The paintings are semantically dense objects which refer to the actions of the ancestral beings in creating the land. They are also maps of the created land and they encode the structure of Yolngu clan organization. Each painting could be the subject of a book but it is only glimpsed at a distance by most participants in the ceremony and is not present to be examined in detail. Its semantic and cognitive significance is not located in the moment or instance of its physical expression, but in its existence within a mental archive of possible images, connected through the Yolngu system of knowledge to other instances of ancestral power in the form of songs, landscape, designs belonging to different places and associated with different ancestral beings. To attempt to understand its significance without reference to this wider context is as meaningful as trying to learn the meaning of a word from its occurrence in a single sentence (for a detailed analysis of Yolngu art see Morphy 1991).

In China by comparison, paintings in the literati tradition that have been produced by an individual artist at a specific moment in time may be altered by the addition of seals or later inscriptions made by the artist or subsequent collectors. The evolution of the painting itself, reactions of viewers, and the painting's provenance thus become marked on the object itself. A single painting can also become part of an ongoing system of inspiration and commentary involving calligraphy, poetry and subsequent paintings produced by the original artist or another. Artists use these multiple art forms to complement and comment upon one another's work over time (see Sullivan 1974 and Vinograd 1991). Even direct copies of a painting produced by another artist are often held in very high regard and this practice continues to be central to the current system of education. This practice is sometimes viewed as a form of competition with the master painters of the past that allows the tradition to evolve and remain vital (Fu 1991).

We have used specific examples, but we are making a general point that must be a central proposition of the anthropology of art: understanding the significance of the work requires placing it in the widest possible context. It is not sufficient – or perhaps possible – to understand its immediate effect or significance without first understanding the historical, social, and cultural backgrounds to its production. One of the advantages of studying art works is that they provide a means to access the processual dimension of culture. They connect events with processes and they connect experiences separated in time.

The Anthropology of Art and Interdisciplinary Discourse

Ironically the future anthropology of art must re-engage with those methods and problems that led a different generation of anthropologists to reject the study of art in the first place. It must engage with the study of form at the micro level, seeing in the production of art objects a form of agency that arises from bodies of knowledge.

At the macro level it must engage in the study of form for the purpose of comparative and historical analysis. Attention to form and the relative autonomy of form forces attention away from any single interpretative framework and encourages the researcher to look for the widest possible range of explanations for the existence of objects themselves and the contribution they make to an event. Different objects contribute in different ways. The study of form opens up a full range of avenues to explore the psychological impact of objects, their cognitive significance, the creative processes that underlie them and their contribution to systems of knowledge and meaning.

A revitalized study of form can also help reforge the links between the research of anthropologists and of scholars working in related disciplines such as social history, art history, and archaeology. Analyses of form can be central to the analysis of historical process and the dynamics of relationships between groups over time. Studies of dress, for example, can provide information about changes in the expression of religious ideology, in concepts of gender and in gender relations (e.g. Hendrickson 1995; Banerjee and Miller 2003). While not every anthropologist will be interested in historical processes, it is important to create a dialogue across disciplines that involves shared methodologies and problematics. The input of anthropology into archaeology has often been in the form of lessons in social theory, but in the absence of methodologies that enable those theories to be applied in concrete archaeological situations.

The analysis of the distribution of art styles can provide relevant data for social and historical studies aimed at establishing the nature, permeability and fluidity of social and cultural boundaries. The use of art in cultural mapping has a long history in studies of African art (see Fagg 1964 and Kasfir's, 1984, critique). While simple correlations between artistic styles and other components of culture – such as linguistic boundaries or kinship systems – are seldom going to be found, style in art nonetheless provides a relevant source of data for interrogating boundaries and the nature of movements across them in the context of long-term social and cultural processes (see Dietler and Herbich 1998 for a relevant discussion). Attempts to establish relationships between art styles and cognitive structures (Fisher 1961) or social systems (Berndt 1971) have been controversial, but may none the less provide interesting directions for research if the complexity of the relationships is sufficiently taken into account.

The anthropological study of art has recently had an important impact on anthropological studies of social change and processes of globalization. The impact has been in two main areas: in the study of processes of trade and exchange, and in the discourse on the process of globalization, including the conceptualization of cultural boundaries. The two issues are closely related since the "traffic in culture" has always been an area that problematizes an over-rigid and prescriptive model of cultures as bounded entities. The sale of art objects and craft has been one of the main entry points for small-scale societies into the global economy; it is also one of the main ways in which the image of such societies is created in the imagination of outsiders. While ethnographic museums were an integral component of the global trade in indigenous craft from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, anthropologists in general neglected to study – or perhaps even see – the trade, for a number of reasons. In part, anthropologists were interested in small-scale societies as they were before European colonization, and trade with Europeans shattered the illusion of the

"uncontaminated savage." The primary aim of anthropology, for a long time, was to reconstruct societies as they were before colonization. Hence the influence of outsiders was something to be factored out or overlooked. For a long time anthropologists, on the whole, neglected social change. They saw it as something exogenous to the societies that they studied, rather than as a process in which such societies were fully engaged – albeit often from a position of disadvantage. In recent years understanding of these issues has been transformed. The pioneering work of Nelson Graburn (ch. 23) and his co-authors established that trade in art and artifacts was very much a component of contemporary relations between indigenous and non-indigenous societies. Nicholas Thomas's (1991, 1999) later work showed that the exchange of goods and mutual influence was integral to the colonial process from the very beginning. The writings of Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986) and Steiner (ch. 25) explored the journeys of objects across boundaries and the implications of these journeys for our conceptions of the producing and consuming cultures.[32]

It is now understood that the value creation processes in which objects partake are not restricted to the place and time of their production, but inhere in all of the interactions in which they are involved. The nature of the value creation processes will depend on the role that art has in the producing society, and in particular historical circumstances. Trade in art objects that have a central role in a society's religious or ritual system can be a sign of the loss of value of those works in their indigenous context; a marker of religious transformation or the effect of missionary zeal. On the other hand, trade in highly valued religious art can be quite compatible with the role that the object has in its original context (as has been suggested for New Ireland Malangans (Gell 1998: 224–225)) and may contribute to increasing understanding in the consuming society of the religion and the values that underpin it (as is the case with much contemporary Australian Aboriginal art).

Art can be one of the means by which the image of a culture is conveyed across time and space. But the images that are created in this way often involve cultural stereotypes that belong to the consuming culture rather than to the producing culture. The processes of selection and interpretation can create a simplified, essentialized, atemporal image of a particular society which bears little relation to its recent history or contemporary existence. These processes have been well explored in the writings of Price (ch.10), Errington (1998) and Karp et al. (1991, 1992). However the critique of the appropriation of art to create representations of "other" cultures must not in itself be essentialized to cover all places and times. It has been recognized recently that such essentialization denies the agency of indigenous peoples in both the past and the present. Indigenous people have often used art as a means to economic survival, as a demonstration of skills and cultural values, and as a means to assert cultural identity in a changing world (Dussart 1997). Art production has also been integral to dynamic processes in the producing societies: changes in the relations between men and women, in religious ideology, in employment and occupation. Art is nearly always produced in contested environments and the study of art in colonial and post-colonial contexts provides a means to access those dynamic processes.

The denial of agency to indigenous artists takes us back to the very beginnings of this introduction; to the modernist myth that saw the Western artist as the person who recognized the value in the work of primitive art or folk music. However it is often the case that indigenous artists and craftspeople have been active in the process

of manufacturing and marketing their art for new audiences, and creating new musical forms. We may now label such things as "world music" or "world art," which again tends to deny agency to the indigenous peoples. It is appropriation in modern dress. In cultural studies and some areas of anthropology a judgmental element has come into the analysis – this mixing of cultures has been celebrated as the production of a hybrid post-colonial world, in opposition to previous models that focussed on difference. The agency of individuals who contribute to local trajectories and identity formation processes as well as being participants in more global processes, is de-emphasized. The problem of scale is important here. We prefer instead to see people acting in several frames, which do not in any simple sense include each other. The local is not nested in the global (or displaced by it), but rather articulates with it. We would expect a future anthropology of art to contribute to a more subtle and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the local and the global, and to situate the social and cultural production of art in space and time in a way that reveals the reasons for its irrepressible diversity and inventiveness. This requires a sophisticated understanding of local contexts of production – not frozen in some precolonial time/space, but dynamic and productive.

Exhibiting Art Today

Changing anthropological ideas have had an impact on the role of museums and art galleries as repositories of cultural artifacts. Two almost unrelated processes have made museums exciting places again. First, they have been properly recognized as valued repositories of cultural and historical archives providing a resource that allows for the reanalysis of contact history, colonial processes, changes in material culture and so on. Second, indigenous peoples have rediscovered their pasts in the collections. They are using museums as means to come to terms with loss. In some cases they see the preservation of past histories as a source of strength, giving them unique identities within the nation states that have incorporated them. Museums and art galleries have become spaces for contesting the stereotyped images of the past and challenging the assumptions of the present. Indeed in some settler colonial societies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand a more anthropologically informed understanding of history has led to the rise of a competing indigenous identity which is replacing some of the myths of nationhood associated with the colonial process.

In a contemporary context the notion of the museum has, like art, been exported and differentially adopted or rejected, based upon its relevance to a particular nation or range of cultures. Collection, preservation, and display are now no longer the province of museums as Western institutions. They have entered a cross-cultural space where their value is reappraised. The potlatch, for example, was and continues to be a forum for the collection and display of material objects in a social and cultural context that has been represented in museums in both local and urban settings. The repatriation of a potlatch collection to Cape Mudge and Alert Bay, British Columbia (Clifford 1991) highlights the way that Western standards of museum practice have, in some cases, been imposed (the criteria for this return stipulated that the objects must be housed in a museum) even as local communities alter those practices to become locally relevant. The current policy of the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian – where Native and non-