The Social Life of Art

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INTRODUCTION

> We no longer live in a separate world. Our tribal view of art history as primarily or exclusively European or Eurocentric will become increasingly harmful as it cuts us off from the emerging Third World and isolates us from the global culture which is already in its early stages. We must have values that can include the rest of the world when the moment comes—and the moment is upon us.[1]

1. Historicism and the Flow of Time

Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out that it is the ideal of the social sciences "to understand the phenomenon itself in its unique and historical concreteness."[2] This study tries to live up to that ideal, to examine not only the objects and processes that make up the artworlds of human history, but also the social and cultural circumstances that brought and bring about their creation, frame their functioning, inform their properties and influence their effects.

However it is equally important to see any unique object and historicised context within the flow of time. In the short span that "art" has played a part in human life we may conceive of time as a social river, with a strong current towards the capricious mainstream, eddies and quiet pools near the banks. The current will flow faster in spate and slower in drought. But it will be forever in motion. It will be unpredictable. Nothing will stop its inexorable force. Art runs in that social river, subject to the flow and chance of time.

2. The Not-so-Innocent Eye

Though the instrument of enquiry is the "innocent," the "philistine" eye of the anthropologist, that narrow focus on the specific is everywhere expanded by the wider vision of the sociologist: the cultural phenomenon is constantly gathered into socially interpretive general concepts, that are themselves maintained only for the use that can be made of them, and discarded when that use has served its passing, briefly enlightening purpose: all ideas are constantly under erasure.

Of course there is no "innocent eye." As Martin Jay observes "there is no view from nowhere for even the most scrupulously detached observer."[3] Like all explorations of social history, this study is driven by a particular, authorial ideological energy. The prejudices directing my "innocence," my passions and my desires, are frequently confessed. Moreover the text constantly alerts the reader to the partialities to which this writer, and any other, as well as you, the reader, is subject. Therefore any introduction must start with an explanation of the prejudices propelling the direction of this particular discourse.

As an art historian and theorist the area of my special interest has been the work of the Russian avant-garde 1870-1930. In particular I have studied the artworks and writing of Kandinsky and Malevich. From my perspective, neither artist, despite their highly complex succession of images, despite their far-reaching observations and pioneering theorising, has been taken seriously enough by Western art historians. The reason, it always seemed to me, was because they were Russians. Western art history places at the centre of its enterprise the work of the Ancient Greeks, the Italians of the Renaissance and, within certain time periods, the art of the Low Countries, France and Spain. The art of everywhere else and of everyone else is peripheral, provincial. The further you go in space and time from the cradle of the Renaissance the art is disregarded. Away from that core art rapidly becomes "non-art."[4]

This has to do with the way the West most profoundly saw itself in the nineteenth century when "art history" had its origins, and continues, by and large, to see itself, as the centre of "civilisation" set about with barbarisms. "The West is," as Igor Kopytoff pointed out, "a unique cultural entity, with a historically conditioned set of predispositions to see the world in certain ways."[5] This is not to say that the West is indifferent to the worlds of Others, those without the benefits of "civilisation." Yet those Others were, and largely are, seen in terms of the West's narcissism, as cultural material by which the West may sharpen its conceit of itself. Others were not credited with having the possibility of coherent social systems, differently functioning rationalities, their own histories and discourses of reasons.[6] They were regarded as chthonic, unstructured, without law, as primitive, indeed scarcely "human." Others were the uncivilised against which civilisation took its measure. They were the West's "own dreaded Nemesis."[7] They certainly had no art.

This was, and is, a monstrously skewed history of artistic creativity, its social functioning and cultural complexity.

3. The View from Above

It is possible to overcome this narcissism, or at least to acknowledge it and confront it, by presenting the enquiring reader with another "certain way" of seeing, a sociological-anthropological-functionalist view from above, what Jean Starobinski calls "*le regard surplombant*." This could, in a range of possible choices, consist of a paradigmatic survey of the creation and functioning of expressive images, emphasising the particularity of Western art, bringing more into focus the art of all periods of history and cultural locations, and exploring "the complex relations that unite a destiny and a work in their historical and social milieu."[8]

This approach must, of necessity, appear iconoclastic, breaking with the overarching hegemony of Western art history, with its own methodological determinations, and privileging the voice of other subjectivities, the many disenfranchised histories of art, in order to redress a series of imbalances in historical perspective. If nothing else, perhaps as a result of reading this book, the interested reader may better understand that Western art history has attempted, both intellectually and materially, to colonise the world with its singular narrative of art, giving value to its own products and, in the process, demeaning the social and cultural significance of the art of all Others, both within their own cultures and on the world's stage.[9]

4. Social Mythologies

All societies have their own genesis and their own traditions. Language and images act as conduits for the transmission of those traditions, those customs of social behaviour, of morality, of taste, of dominating ideologies, and views of what is "real." Gadamer pointed out that "it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to the language that speaks to us in tradition."[10] Roland Barthes mischievously called these dominating prejudices mythologies, the falsely obvious notions a society has about itself, which have become entrenched as normative, as the natural order of things.[11] Just as different societies have different traditions, different mythologies about themselves, as well as systems of rationality, so too they have different criteria for the ordination of visual images and objects before the altar of "Art."[12]

This is not to say that other societies need a concept of "art" analogous to that of the West. Even in the West the use of "art" has changed over time, and in a variety of contexts, to mean different things. It is enough that certain images and objects, subject to certain social transformative practices in particular cultures, are elevated above the merely utile, the

immediate, to take on an expressive, allegorical, metaphorical, religious, transcendent, or psychological significance, that constitutes a practice of "art," that is itself subject to constant change. Albert Boime emphasised that social transformation holds the key to understanding cultural development "and any attempt to circumvent it seriously distorts the history of art. While traditional art history has generally isolated its subject, treating it almost as an autonomous phenomenon, the social history of art seeks to set the artist and the work of art into a broad historical and economic context in order to ground it upon the fundamental facts of material life."[13]

5. Dynamic Enquiry

The limits of this particular enquiry are marked out in the first chapters of this book, encompassing those images and objects endowed with some measure of metaphorical or transcendent significance.

Companion disciplines, both contemporary visual culture and the history of images, go beyond this, to look at non-art systems, including informational signs.[14] Communication theory also covers neighbouring fields, as do the histories of film and media.

Nevertheless this is a dynamic enquiry, recognising that boundaries are conceptual rather than real, and constantly in need of infiltration, realignment and renegotiation. Not only have the objects that constitute "art" in art histories changed over time, undergoing "a continual metamorphosis within the opposition between notation and meaning,"[15] but even the notion of what constitutes art history and its methods change in response to social dynamics.

Traditional art history is preoccupied with provenance, connoisseurship, and what Roland Barthes calls the "readerly" documentation of aesthetic response: the viewer is a consumer, the art object a product and the art historian and critic an interpreter of its history, aesthetic value and, often through elaborate ekphrasis, its meaning or significance.[16] This study, on the other hand, concerns itself with the way images function in social and cultural life, with what brings about their making, circumscribes their form, conditions their evaluation, the way they come to be regarded over time and within other cultures, and how they are used to create, as well as sometimes to cross, cultural divides. It is concerned with the image as a "writerly" text, as constituting a particular social phenomenon, having historical meaning within particular cultural contexts, but also acting upon and acted upon by ever-new viewers, in an infinity of circumstances and confrontations, to create new meanings. As Nicholas Green and Frank

Mort have pointed out, "visual representations need to be seen as part of an interlocking set of histories which involve multiple relations and dependencies across a range of social fields and practices."[17]

6. Paradoxes

Of necessity this venture entertains certain paradoxes. Any history of art has "rules" that underpin it.[18] We are expected to think and look according to the traditions of our culture, to learn the "rules" of looking and invoking meaning. This book too sets out a code of rules. In doing so it often disregards and undermines the rules of others, about some of which it will show a regrettable ignorance. These positive and negative aspects of framing an argument are endemic to any creative enterprise.

Any code of rules will attempt to pre-empt the future, to indulge in intellectual coercion. After all, every point of view is true only from its own perspective. As Adam Phillips pointed out "the paradox of all deterministic theories is that they can only be discovered through the determinisms they describe."[19]

At the same time, one of the rules adhered to in this book, as with Wittgenstein, is to question the very authority of rules, and to open up for the reader the possibilities of an infinitude of readings. This is not a story of art constrained by chronology, by a sense of progress. It is an explanation of art's functioning in all societies, across all time, free of any sense of the superiority of the present.

This is not a general survey. Rather it is an attempt to construct a methodology of working with art objects that can be applied to any set of historical and cultural circumstances. This methodology will not be based upon a set of tools, but upon a way of thinking about art, about culture, about historical processes, about systems of evaluation. There is no desire to turn the reader into a mindless consumer of a rule-bound product, but to see the possibility of producing an art history suitable for their own social circumstances, to be able to approach the texts of art history at "the plurality of [their] entrances…none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one," and to know, at the same time, that whatever they create is simply a "story," however temporarily satisfying.[20] In addition you, the reader, may be persuaded to the possibility of new futures, of creating new histories of art, less constrained by the rules that keep your social functioning, and your looking, in some respects hidebound.

In the drive for synopsis, for the universal, it is essential not to lose sight either of the objects that make up our artworlds, nor of the

particularity of responses to them. Starobinski and Martin Jay looked for a balance:

> The complete critique is perhaps not one that aims at totality (as does *le regard surplombant*) nor that which aims at intimacy (as does identifying intuition); it is the look that knows how to demand, in their turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indefatigably from one to the other. One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its powers.[21]

7. Deconstructing the Field of Art

In its totalising mode, this book is an overview of the general fields of enquiry with which it is necessary to engage in seeking art in the order of things. "The deconstruction of the field of art should entail the investigation of the many processes by which its nature and status have been constructed and secured through specific practices at different historical periods."[22] The first two chapters explain how the notion of "art" is understood for the purposes of this study and pursue a brief course of concept analysis. Few books on art history attempt such a task, taking for granted that the things discussed within its covers are, by general consensus, "art." Others, like James Elkins, make it quite clear what their criteria are within a particular context. This book follows his example.

The argument starts from the assumption that all works of art are made by human hand, or transformed from nature by social practice. These works are then placed within a set of ordering, methodological principles, to create a pattern of understanding, or else, to rephrase Gombrich, the atoms of the past would fall back into random dust heaps and we would be no further advanced in our comprehension of the way art functions.[23] This set of ordering principles is essentially dynamic, subject to the constancy of change. As Igor Kopytoff has pointed out:

> The world of things [like art] lends itself to an endless number of classifications, rooted in natural features and cultural and idiosyncratic perceptions. The individual mind can play with them all, constructing innumerable classes, different universes of common value, and changing spheres of exchange.[24]

Gombrich criticises the underlying Hegelian holism of Burckhardt's evocation of the Renaissance.[25] In the rich tapestry of his own work Gombrich claims to prefer the study "of the individual and the particular

rather than...the study of structures and patterns."[26] Yet in its totality Gombrich's work itself is not entirely free of what he calls, disparagingly, a Hegelian holism. This book outlines one way of creating a pattern by which we might explore the social functioning of art. It too has holistic ambitions, but also acknowledges the limitations of all conceptual structures. We have already welcomed the enriching complexities of paradox

8. Transcendent Essentialism

The organising principles in this study assume a functioning or materialist position: a work of art is any object made or transformed by human agency that becomes invested with sufficient culturally-sanctioned charge or eloquence to elevate it as a vehicle of social significance, to bring it to public attention as a candidate for appreciation. This is not a static but dynamic investment. For example, material objects can be anointed with meanings they did not possess in the culture in which they were made and originally functioned. Equally, objects with transcendent investment may lose that charge over time and in another cultural context. Objects and practices lie on a complex grid of ever changing value as they move in and out of artworlds, themselves forever being reconfigured.

Lisa Tickner put the task most clearly:

> We have to account for the traffic in signs between different sites of representation (not for the preciosity of the discrete object, arranged in a narrative sequence that guarantees its authorial, stylistic, or national identity). We need a history of the "battlefield of representations," which is something other than a history of style and *facture* (or handling) on the one hand and events and institutions on the other. We need an understanding of the visual articulation and production of ideological components (works of art are neither ideologically saturated nor ideologically pure). We need a theory of subjectivity that can cope with the unconscious and with the splintering identifications of gender, class, and race as momentarily they collide and overlap.[27]

Though "art" is a labile, multivalent concept, across cultures and across time, I trust my discourse will state its own reasons sufficiently clearly to make what I conceive as "art" at any juncture intelligible to the reader. An elucidation of the nature of "art" will, in its turn, lead to an elucidation of the methods of treating the subject.

Of course my explanation of "art," as outlined in the first two chapters, makes no essentialist claim, as that epithet is commonly understood. It is a

functional explanation: a strategic explanation that will enable me to construct an ordering principle. Above all I want to persuade the reader to admit the possibility of "changing the aspect"[28] under which we may see the operation of art in society, to feel free to change the way in which art is perceived, to understand a little more clearly the way we see something as something. It is Wittgenstein's view that the way we do this depends upon the culture in which we operate. "*All* meaning is *in* culture."[29] As Ray Monk has pointed out:

> The philosophical difficulty about aspect-seeing arises from the *prima facie*, and puzzling, fact that, though the aspect changes, the thing that is seen does not; the same drawing is now a duck, and now a rabbit. Likewise it is the same joke, poem, painting or piece of music that is now just an extraordinary, outlandish piece of behaviour, words on a page, splashes on a canvas or an incoherent noise, and now (when it is understood) funny, moving, beautiful or wonderfully expressive: "What is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed."[30]

Monk goes on to emphasise that "frameworks change, both between different cultures and within a culture between different times,"[31] a point of view to which this study emphatically subscribes.

Sixteen others chapters follow, examining art and society, art and language, art and ideologies, art and value, and so on, with examples taken from non-Western as well as the Western tradition.

9. Aesthetics

Notions of taste often differentiate a dominant, authenticating elite from the disenfranchised masses, one culture from another. Gadamer claims that

> what is valid in a society, what taste dominates it, characterises the community of social life. Such a society chooses and knows what belongs to it and what does not. Even the possession of artistic interests is not random and universal in its ideas, but what artists create and what society values belong together in the unity of a style of life and ideal of taste.[32]

There is a dynamic history of cultural combativeness, one set of social forces now dominant, only to be replaced in time by another, itself temporarily more successful in controlling the way reality is perceived. All societies are driven by the desire for power, to control others through economic and cultural domination, wielding the clubs of ideological aggression. One aspect of that ideological aggression is the imposition of rules of taste and notions of aesthetic approbation.

Part of the West's ideological armoury is its adoption of the idea of a universal aesthetic, that "no longer permit[s] any criterion of content and dissolv[es] the connection of the work of art with its world."[33] The strength of this position lies in its total lack of definiteness. Gadamer goes on to point out that in these circumstances "the connection of the work of art with its world is no longer of any importance to it but, on the contrary, the aesthetic consciousness is the experiencing centre from which everything considered to be art is measured."[34] These processes of creating aesthetic differentiation in various cultures and times, usually for the purpose of claiming cultural superiority for systems of evaluating "works of art," are socially constructed. In claiming a monopoly over questions of taste by a mobile feeling for quality, through a dominating aesthetic system, elites exclude from their purview the products and practices of "Others" and develop what Kaja Silverman calls "dominant fictions."[35] They are driven by the desire, often unconscious because it is regarded as self-evident, for ideological and political hegemonic authority, rather than a sense of egalitarian pluralism.

With ideas of universalising "aesthetic differentiation" now spreading from the West to the culturally colonised world, the artist, both in the West and in the non-Western world, is losing the sense of purpose directed from the customs and traditions of local societies, and can only function by competing for a place amongst those chosen for favour by the gate-keepers of a Western-dominated international aesthetic consciousness.

If we want to find a theory of universal aesthetics, then perhaps, rather than adapting Kant and Hegel to culturally inappropriate situations, we may see aesthetic theories as forms of social sublimation. How can societies obtain cultural satisfaction from their, often disruptive, cultural desires? Adam Phillips claims that, "sublimation…is a figure for remaking, for redescription, but in the service of delight."[36] Art as pleasure, art as solace, the psychological roles that art may play, lie within the interstices of the material discussed in each chapter.

10. A Note on Language

Much has been written about the approximate nature of verbal communication. My understanding of words and phrases may not equate with the language, however explained, of the reader. Language is but hinting. Phillips has pointed out that "language…is like perfume; it circulates to unpredictable effect. We might make our words smell as nice as they can but they will go into the world and be made use of sometimes beyond our wildest intensions."[37] My words will, of course, evoke

associations in the reader over which I have no control (power) and may give rise to effects, to freely created associations, that I find astonishing but can only welcome.

11. Scepticism

The organising principles of this study invite, indeed insist upon scepticism. Despite encouraging the cultivation of points of view at variance with Eurocentrism, I must confess to remaining within the thrall of the Western Enlightenment. Gadamer emphasises that "there is one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power."[38]

The very scepticism embedded within the Enlightenment will assist me in my attempt to overthrow the hegemony of the Western view of art history. After all, Western art history is only one specially privileged instance of looking at art production and reception.[39] This book is an attempt to replace this Western view by another, more broadly based, treating the art of all human beings, and the way it is produced, used, valued, exchanged and written into histories, as equally worthy of respect and carefully considered attention. The purpose is a revolution of knowledge in order to increase our humanity rather than diminish it. Indeed I trust that this study will have a civilising effect, will serve to enrich that sense of "culture" beloved of the Western tradition—a respect for moral values, learning and urbanity.

I must also confess that in undermining all "stories," in defying their authority, I have constructed another in its place. A book without a plot would be a random series of incidents with no appeal to any but the most perverse of readers. The plot of this book serves to question the moral universe in which Western art history has been constructed. It seeks to replace it, until we conceive of a better, by an alternative based upon a plurality of rationalities rather than upon hegemonic certainty, a universe of necessity loosely constructed in terms of narrativity. This new story welcomes the constant recasting of events and their historical significance. It is therefore less hierarchic, less myopic, more universalising. It is driven by an ethical imperative to give proper due to one of the most fundamental activities of human beings, the making of images and their elevation by human agency into transcendent objects, across all cultures and across all time.

12. Exhortation

I want this book to be a challenge to the reader, perhaps changing their understanding of "art." If so, the reader's world will have changed and, I trust, their sense of the rich tapestry of human endeavour, life's irreducible variety, will have been embellished. Instead of searching for Western-orientated generalities, instead of seeking closure, instead of yearning for a product, the reader may be induced to relish difference, to write, and endlessly rewrite, their own story. In which case they will have fallen for the perfume of my propaganda, the very seduction I warn against on almost every page of this book!

Notes

[1] Thomas McEvilley, Letters: On "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: '"Primitivism in 20th Century Art' at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984," Part 2, *Artforum*, May 1985, 63-71.

[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheen and Ward, 1975), 6.

[3] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 18.

[4] James Elkins, "Art History and Images That Are Not Art," *Art Bulletin*, 77:4, 1995, 553.

[5] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as Process," in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 84.

[6] Any discourse of reasons, or network of discourse, will conceal social particularities, in order to elevate a culture's set of dominant fictions to the status of a general truth. It will also mark the boundaries of Self and Other. It will deal primarily with the fictions connecting those that belong. "Different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922) 6. 341.

[7] Lionel Gossman, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 274.

[8] Jean Starobinski, *L'oeil vivant: Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) 26, as cited by Jay: 1994, 19.

[9] This study is written with full awareness of the pitfalls awaiting creators of alternative stories of art. In a truly playful book, James Elkins outlines, at times even parodies, the many "stories of art" that have been produced in the West and elsewhere. He warns that the sort of enterprise with which this book is engaged is both impossible and misdirected. I understand his misgivings. However none of the examples he cites takes a materialist-anthropological method as its directing

imperative. In this respect this study has qualities unrelated to those examined by Elkins. James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[10] Gadamer: 1975, 239.
[11] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (St Albans: Paladin, 1973), 11.
[12] Peter Winch, "Understanding Primitive Society," in Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 98-100.
[13] Albert Boime, *Social History of Modern Art*, 1 (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987), xix. Theodor Adorno claims that, what is often regarded as the "alienation and autonomy" of art in the twentieth century is a result of "art's" socio-economic development, its assumption of a new function, instead of serving religion becoming "a commodity to be exchanged." Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002) 128-9. Yet the burden of this book is that art has always been a commodity to be exchanged.
[14] Elkins differentiates between "expressive" and what he calls "informational images" (Panofsky's "vehicles of communication"), such as mathematical symbols and writing. However he goes to great pains to emphasize that these categories are by no means pure. Elkins: 1995, 554 and Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1955), 12.
[15] Frank Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 153.
[16] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 3-6.
[17] Nicholas Green and Frank Mort, "Visual Representation and Cultural Politics," in *The Block Reader in Visual Culture (*London and New York: Routledge 1996), 227.
[18] The word "rules" is used here, not unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein in his "Lectures on Aesthetics," to mean the underlying particular historical system, the "language games," used to make judgements in particular cultural circumstances. L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 5-6.
[19] Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Pantheon, 1998), 113.
[20] Barthes: 1975, 5-6.
[21] Starobinski: 1961, 26, as cited in Jay: 1994, 19-20.
[22] Green and Mort: 1996, 227.
[23] Ernst Gombrich, "In Search of Cultural History," in his *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979), 42.
[24] Appadurai: 1986, 76.
[25] Gomrich: 1979, 32-8.
[26] Gombrich: 1979, 57.
[27] Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference," in *Genders*, 3, Fall 1988, 94.
[28] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), 196-7.
[29] Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 76.

[30] Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape, 1990), 533. The last sentence is quoted from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 474.
[31] Monk: 1990, 570.
[32] Gadamer: 1975, 76.
[33] ibid.
[34] ibid.
[35] Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Chapter 1.
[36] Phillips: 1998, 23.
[37] Phillips: 1998, 76.
[38] Gadamer: 1975, 239-40.
[39] This idea, and many others in this Introduction, have been eloquently argued by Larry Shiner in his own "Introduction" to his *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3-18.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ART

1. Things

Art objects and artworks are things.[1] They are produced to satisfy a demand. They are used. They often circulate or are exchanged within economic systems. They are cultural commodities,[2] marked, encoded with significance, not only by the society in which they were made, but also within subsequent social contexts.[3] Their cultural significance resides both within codes of morality and regimes of values[4]— use values, commodity and exchange values, spiritual, psychological and aesthetic values, amongst many and varying others. They are commented upon. They are written about. They are studied. They are collected. They are displayed. They are often housed in special repositories. They have histories. They have histories of their histories. Theories are created to account for those histories, for the methods of their study, for their manifestations and effects. They become the subjects of academic discourse and pedagogic rhetoric. They are value-laden things-in-motion through time and space.

People relate to things, including artworks, in different cultures in different ways. Even within the same culture people do not relate to the same things in the same way. "The same culturally legitimised object may provide only fleeting comfort to one person, whereas to another it signifies complex emotional and cognitive ties to other people and ideas."[5]

2. Meanings, Values and Demand

Though artworks are, for example, simply paint on canvas, or carved wood, the materials have no essential meanings in themselves. The very designation of a thing as an "artwork"[6] implies a cultural significance carrying with it particular meanings and values, attributed through the functions of traditions, or unspecified givens associated with the mode and manner of display. As Franz Steiner put it, "meanings are generated in social life: society has to be studied as part of a system of beliefs."[7]

Artworks are essentially social things, incarnated, socialising signs playing roles in symbolic systems and responding to political necessities. From their moment of creation, meanings and values accrue to artworks. These values multiply and metamorphose, as the objects move through space and time. Meanings and values, like the objects themselves, have cultural biographies within ever-changing human communities, biographies related to the demands to which the same objects are subject over time.

Demand is a function of a variety of social practices and is the economic expression of the political logic of consumption. It is subject to collective regulation and itself regulates consumption, which is "eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive."[8] Demand and consumption are in a state of reflexive complementarity: artworks "make and use their makers and users."[9] Traders, taste-makers, the political, economic and intellectual élites, all play parts in these cultural dynamics.

3. Social Histories, Geographies, Cultural Biographies

Social histories of things called "art" take a variety of forms, depending upon the writer's point of vantage, ideological perspective or political imperative. Such histories will generally be holistic, looking at the making, use and evaluation of art objects within specific historical contexts—for example, place and time, era or empire, evolving traditions or processes of dynamic dislocation. Social histories may highlight commodities, such as artworks and the systems in which they have value, as social forms and distributions of knowledge. Production knowledge, for example, relates to the technical aspects of making or constructing, to the social considerations of production, as well as to the aesthetic parameters of the selection of materials, forms of presentation and so on. Consumption knowledge relates to the reception, use, methods of exchange and display, the creation of values. It is a widespread generalisation, for example, amongst anthropologists, sociologists and social historians of art, that these spheres of knowledge overlap in small-scale economies and become disassociated from one another in complex societies, with monetisation and a growing division of labour.[10] "The social history of things...reflects very complicated shifts in the organisation of knowledge and modes of production" that have deep cultural dimensions.[11]

More specific studies may select the history of the art of a class or social group within a broader cultural domain, akin to the notion of a register in linguistics—the history of the art making of guilds, of cults, of

peasant pastoralists, for example. Less satisfactory, from a social historian's point of view, are those studies grouping together seemingly similar objects, such as Melanesian masks, with their shifting social utility, evolution of styles, and spheres of evaluation. These range from the coffee table presentation of superficial similarities to considered comparisons, relating each manifestation back into specific cultural and historical contexts, such as Alfred Gell's study of tattooing in Polynesia, *Wrapping in Images*.[12]

Less attention has been paid to the way geography affects both the development and use of art objects, though the specificities of place are often assumed or implied in social and cultural histories. Jonathan Raban muses on the significance of the sea in the art of the Salish, Kwakiutl, Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit of the northwest Pacific coast of America:

> The more I looked at these pictures, the more I saw that North-West Indian art was maritime in much more than subject matter. Its whole formal conception and composition were rooted in the Indians' experience of water (a fact that seems generally to have eluded its curators). The rage for symmetry, for images paired with their doubles, was gained, surely, from a daily acquaintance with mirror-reflections: the canoe and its inverted twin, on a sheltered inlet in the stillness of dusk and dawn. The typical "ovoid" shape—the basic unit of composition, used by all the tribes along the Inside Passage—was exactly that of the tiny capillary wave raised by a cat's-paw of wind, as it catches the light and makes a frame for the sun. The most arresting formal feature of coastal Indian art, its habit of dismembering creatures and scattering their parts in different quarters of a large design, perfectly mimicked the way in which a slight ripple will smash a reflection into an abstract of fragmentary images.[13]

Cultural biographies relate to the social histories of specific artworks as they move through time, such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*; passing from one owner to another, from space to space; now hot news, now comparatively forgotten; now a personal portrait, now a masterpiece within a prestigious collection of such objects; now in Napoleon's dressing room, now in the Louvre; now stolen and hidden in a trunk, now behind bullet-proof glass in a room of its own. Cultural biographies are cumulative: the richer the biography the greater the significance of the work. Biographies also reveal the dynamics of social systems and their ever-changing collective comprehension of things, of particular artworks and artworks in general.

4. A Word of Caution

The social history of things and their cultural biography are not entirely separate matters, for it is the social history of things [and we may substitute the word "art" here for "things" to make these remarks more pertinent to our enquiry] over long periods of time and within large social contexts—civilisations, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories. It is also the case, though it is typically harder to document or predict, that many small shifts in the cultural biography of things may, over time, lead to shifts in the social history of things. Examples of these complex relations between small- and large-scale trajectories and short- and long-term patterns in the movement of things are not widespread in the literature,[14] but we can begin to look at these relations with reference to the transformations of exchange systems under the impact of colonial rule,[15] and to the transformations of Western society that have led to the emergence of the souvenir, the collectible, and the memento.[16]

5. Mapping a Cultural Biography

Cultural biographies of artworks beg a host of questions, to which answers may not always be readily available. Where does the work come from and how did art operate in that society at that time? Who made it? What type of people in that society at that time made such objects? What status did such people have? Why did they make such objects? What was their market and how did it operate? Who were the purchasers and patrons? What role did such artworks play in the society for which they were made? What was their use value—in ritual, in the conveying of political, religious, ideological authority, in play, in the display of wealth, as markers of economic, political or intellectual élites, or of a lower status popular culture, of class, race, or gender, as sites of aesthetic apprehension? What has been the particular biography, the historical and cultural trajectory of the object? What cultural and historical processes have played a part in that trajectory? What are the cultural and historical reasons for changes in the object's fortune? How does its career compare with that of other similar commodities? How has it been, and how is it, valued on a whole range of possible measures?

Each phase in the cultural biography of an artwork will depend upon the motivation of the biographer, as it will for any teller of any particular story of art. As Igor Kopytoff has pointed out, "the cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and

even political judgements, and of convictions and values that shape our attitude to objects labelled 'art'."[17]

6. Objects by Destination, Metamorphosis or Diversion

Some cultural biographies are comparatively straightforward. Matisse painted his canvas *The Girl with Green Eyes* in 1908 as an image within the aesthetic and critical history of Western European art, as a gambit in the competitive moves of the avant-garde, an image to be looked at on gallery walls. It has been written about, placed in histories of Western Modernism. It hangs in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In the same year as completing the painting Matisse wrote a justification of his approach in *Notes of a Painter*, translated the following year into German and Russian, and parts into English in 1910. Jacques Maquet would call this a clear case of a "visual object by destination."[18]

Biographies can also demonstrate how works destined for one role become metamorphosed into serving another function. For example, from at least the fifteenth century in the West African kingdom of Benin brass/bronze casters made trophy heads and commemorative plaques to be used as sacra by the god-rulers. When the British Punitive Expedition sacked Benin in 1897 the troops, and their political advisers, collected these brass/bronze pieces as souvenirs. From sacra they became war booty. It was not long before others recognised an intrinsic artistic significance in these pieces. They were bought and sold in the Western art market, ending up in the enclaved collections of museums. They had become art to be looked at. Maquet would call Benin brasses "art by metamorphosis."[19]

In 1959 the British "junk" artist Gwyther Irwin created a collage entitled *Letter Rain* from scavenged, torn, black and white posters. This detritus of the Western city was arranged on a board and exhibited, aestheticised by decontextualisation as "found" art. Appadurai would call this "commoditisation[20] by diversion," "where value, in the art…market is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts,"[21] driven by the demand in the Western artworld for novelty.

What Appadurai terms "diversion," and Maquet "metamorphosis," the transposition of material from one kind of cultural context to another, usually marks a shift in social dynamics, a newly-discovered cultural self-consciousness, even a crisis of identity. Thus a Maori *patu*, a weapon that often acted as a sign of authority, when removed from its traditional place in a tribal setting and placed in an ethnographic museum, when diverted from its traditional function, marked the demise of traditional Maori community relations under the pressure of European settlement. When the

same object is taken out of the glass case of the ethnographic museum, where it might repose with other "ethnographic material," and is placed by itself on a specially lit plinth in an art gallery, it is further diverted into the realm of Western High Art, perhaps marking the settler culture's crisis of identity, its colonial guilt and the need for redemptive action.

Fig. 1-1. Bisj pole, late 1950s, wood, paint fibre, H. 548.6 x W. 99.1 x D. 160, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; accession no. 1979.206.1611: The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Bisj poles of the Papuan Asmat are uniquely carved for ceremonies to commemorate the dead, after which they are removed to rot in sago swamps, where their magic power will help stimulate the growth of these staple trees.[22] They are specific commodities for a particular purpose, and