

Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 2009

ART FOR ART'S SAKE IN THE OLD STONE AGE¹

GREGORY CURRIE

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM



Pure art and play have in common the fact that they have no purpose beyond themselves and serve no life- or species-preserving functions (John Halverson, “Art for art’s sake in the Palaeolithic”)²

Is there a sensible version of the slogan “Art for art’s sake”? If there is, does it apply to anything? I believe that the answers to these questions are Yes and Yes. A positive answer to the first question alone would not be of interest; an intelligible claim without application does not do us much good. It’s the positive answer to the second question which is, I think, more important and perhaps surprising, since I claim to find art for art’s sake at a time well before most authorities would allow that there was any art at all. But I begin more recently than that.

I. KRISTELLER’S THESIS AND THE MODERNITY OF ART

Fifty years ago Paul Oskar Kristeller argued that what we now take for granted as the system of the arts, their kinds, the relations of those kinds to one another, and their

¹ This research was undertaken with the generous support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

² Image copyright of José-Manuel Benito Álvarez.

relations to other things, is an eighteenth century invention. Remarkably quickly this view became something close to orthodoxy, though as time has gone by questioning voices have occasionally been heard. Suspicious as I have always been of Kristeller's argument, I never had the energy, and certainly not the learning, to challenge it. I'm glad to say that this has been done for me very recently in a comprehensive and, as far as I can see, scholarly way.³ There is always the danger that those of us lacking historical or scholarly credentials of our own will flock to an idea that suits us, launching a children's crusade against a thesis we barely understand and are ill suited to assess. Still, as long as we are prepared to listen to Kristeller's defenders (if any) and to exert due diligence in interrogating the logic of each side's arguments, we may count as entitled to hold a tentative opinion on this specific issue as part of a wider set of views about art and the aesthetic. We might even say that philosophers, committed as they should be to the eventual unification of knowledge, ought to have *some* opinion on this question in cases where their own, professional concerns touch on art and the value of art. I won't, therefore, be put off by my own ignorance; as I see it, Kristeller's thesis is likely to be false.

Kristeller wanted, it seems, to do two things: to trace the origin of our present way of thinking about the arts and (less obvious, this) to identify a pattern of progress in thought which has brought about the 'emancipation' of the arts from practical and especially moral considerations. This emancipation, he was keen to argue, is not at all visible in ancient writings, who did not "detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function".⁴ Other authorities besides Kristeller identify the same break for artistic freedom, but as occurring at a later date: the modernist critic Clement Greenberg finds it in the emergence of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth century.⁵ Others might look a decade or two either side of that, to the time when a whole slew of writers and artists were advocating the idea of "art for art's sake"—Gautier, Poe, Whistler, Swinburne and Pater.⁶ By 1891 Oscar Wilde's opinion that "the moment that an artist takes notice of what other

³ Porter, J. L. (2009), p.1-24. As Porter indicates, he is not the first to be critical of Kristeller, and notes other sceptics, including Stephen Halliwell (2002), pp.7-9.

⁴ Kristeller, P. O. (1990), p.174. See also Shiner, L (2001).

⁵ Greenberg, C. (1988). See again Porter (2009), p.6.

⁶ A useful summary of the history of the term is Sartwell, C (2000).

people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist” should not have seemed particularly new or striking.⁷

Wilde and the other nineteenth century aestheticists can be understood as speaking on their own behalf, in the familiar rhetorical tones of an artistic manifesto: a kind of document which typically looks absurd and exhausted once the novelty has worn off, and which certainly does not represent consensus or even widespread practice. But, as the glad reception of Kristeller’s work indicates, we are very prone to think that we are, collectively, in the grip of the view--enslaving or emancipatory according to taste--that art is characterized by a single-minded devotion to purely aesthetic values.

Nowhere is this view more evident than in the recent writings of anthropologists and archaeologists interested in the cultural products of preliterate and especially very ancient societies; it is strongly reflected in the now near-obligatory preface to works on “prehistoric art”, which attempts to free the reader from a cultural parochialism which assumes that (1) in our culture art is produced by and for individuals who have no other interest than in delighting in the work “for its own sake”, and (2) all other cultures are the same as ours in this respect. Thus Randall White, a distinguished anthropologist, prefaces his account with this summary of the “contemporary western concept of art”:

...there is a discrete sphere of action called “art”. Art is thought to be a uniquely human activity that fulfils an innate need in people to comprehend themselves and the universe; it assumes that making art requires special qualities, such as imagination and creativity, and that works of “true” art are the products of individual genius. Art is thought to be distinct from mere “craft” in that it embodies an original concept, and manifests a leap of the artist’s imagination. Works of art are thought to require an audience, primarily made up of people with special knowledge of art. Art may also be appreciated for its purely visual elements: form, composition, colour and the like. The effects of these on the viewer are thought to be virtually universal, based on natural visual sensitivities that allow even an untrained eye to appreciate them.⁸

There are aspects of this characterisation with which it would be difficult to quarrel, such as the distinction of art from craft, the need for an audience, the uniqueness of art to human kind. But not much of this is distinctively “western”. The requirement of an

⁷ Wilde, O. (1891).

⁸ White, R. (2003), p.23.

audience--someone to see or otherwise experience the artefact--is surely a rather more widespread practice than that, though even in the West we find detailing on, say, church carving that is just about impossible to see. It's more of a stretch to include innateness as part of the official "western" view--there seems to be a very lively debate going on about this.⁹ And to say that art is "uniquely" human is to say that other species don't exhibit the practice: again, probably a view not confined to the west. When it comes to the role of experts, White descends into incoherence. Wanting to convict the view of elitism, he tells us that audiences are to be made up of people with special knowledge; wanting to convict it of cultural imperialism, he says that we assume our natural visual sensitivities are enough to give us everything we want. White is unlikely, I think, to quarrel with, or describe as elitist, the view that one cannot appreciate the art of other societies unless you know something about those societies, their conventions, practices and techniques of making, and the idea that the untrained, uninformed eye is the eye you want when looking at pictures strikes me as the opposite of anything we could describe as western orthodoxy, with its emphasis on connoisseurship and the cultivation of discriminatory looking.

White does go to the trouble of illustrating what he takes to be the vices of culturally insular criticism, quoting a passage from Janson's popular history of art text, which at one point examines a depiction of a bison at the cave of Altamira, in Spain.¹⁰ I'm ready to believe that Janson gets things wrong here, as White points out by contrasting that description with an apparently better informed one from "prehistoric art specialists". They note, for instance, that what for Janson is the effect of shading is in reality the effect of painting on a protruding piece of the cave ceiling; that the bison is not dying but rolling on the ground.¹¹ Bad errors indeed, but do they derive from the adoption of the kind of cultural parochialism White thinks is endemic to the west-looking art-historical community? It is difficult to see how. Janson should have noticed the protuberance in the rock; it seems a lot to suppose that he failed to see it because he assumed that painted ceilings in caves are just like the painted ceiling in the Sistine Chapel. Knowledge of bison behaviour is what one needs,

⁹ Indeed, the art historical establishment seems to regard any suggestion of a biological basis for artistic ambitions and interests as morally unacceptable. See eg Jackie Wullschlager's "review" of Dutton's *The Art Instinct* in *Financial Times*, Saturday March 21st, 2009.

¹⁰ Janson, H. W. (1995). For a photograph of this image see <http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-28985>.

¹¹ From what I can see of the image reproduced by White, the use of shading does seem to have some influence on the impression of bulk, but this is difficult to judge for anyone, like myself, who has not visited the cave and examined the depiction at close range.

presumably, to see what the depicted figure is up to, and it's hardly alien to standard art-historical practice to suppose that the critic of animal paintings should know something about the animals depicted. Some of the other points that White makes about this item just don't seem to contradict anything Janson says; White claims that there is good evidence, for instance, that the whole ceiling is the work of one artist and meant to be seen from a particular point of view—as if historians of Renaissance church art were not interested in attribution or contextualisation.¹²

Perhaps Janson and some of his fellow historians trained in the western classical tradition miss something important in the art of the Paleolithic, though it is not clear from White's account what that is. But certainly, White's cultural relativism blinds him to important problems as well. He quotes with approval a statement to the effect that seeing prehistoric art in terms of western "definitions of realism" distorts our understanding of their goals. But for all the talk there is of the "conventionality" of perspective or proportion, something about the depictions of the Upper Paleolithic cave painters should be blindingly obvious--their extraordinary naturalism. Recognising this fact does not point in the direction of any particular explanation but there is, surely, something to be explained here, and various folk have tried to explain it. Nick Humphrey has offered an explanation which requires us to accept a significant difference between our mental lives, scaffolded as they are around a fully articulated and general language, and the minds of the Paleolithic people, who Humphrey hazards had a much more rudimentary and referentially limited language which allowed them to depict fluently and unconstrained by conceptual thought. Not many prehistorians agree with Humphrey's hypothesis about the impoverishment of language in the Upper Paleolithic and his thesis may be false. But he, at least, can see a problem that cultural relativism cannot acknowledge.¹³

Where are we? Only someone with a hopelessly impoverished understanding of art in the Western tradition would assume that (1) adequately characterises artistic practice, now or at any time. Attempts, such of those of Kristeller, to distil a set of aesthetic and artistic principles that can fairly be said to represent our artistic culture over an historically significant period seem to have failed, and are likely to continue

¹² White himself describes certain depictions as "pointillist". White, R. (2003), p.79.

¹³ Humphrey, N. (1998), pp. 165-91, printed with commentaries and replies from Humphrey. On the idea that language may have evolved over a relatively long period with comparably slow progress towards the complex compositional grammar of modern human languages see Mithen, S. *The Singing Neanderthals*.

to do so. Artistic practice in the west has been, and increasingly is, diverse, contested and frequently at odds with the descriptions that both practitioners and theorists give of it.¹⁴

II. SOMETHING TO BE RESCUED

And there we might leave the matter, discarding the idea of “art for art’s sake” as just one more confusingly extreme formulation that fuels a naïve opposition between modern western conceptions of art and all the rest. And yet.... Might there be another way to think about this: a way which does not immediately line up one extreme against another--art in the service of humanity versus art as the unconstrained will of the artist-genius? It doesn’t seem obviously wrong to suggest that art might *sometimes* be produced under minimal social constraint, where the artist has few reasons for making the work other than that he or she wants to make it and, perhaps, to provide others a kind of delight in its contemplation. To inflate this modest thought into a universal philosophy of art would be a mistake, but so, equally, would it be to assume we could never find circumstances where the thought applies. Can we, somewhere, find room for something like art for art’s sake? Twenty years ago, a literary scholar named John Halverson argued that we could, and that the proper place to look for it was not the decadent capitals of nineteenth century Europe but at the very beginning of art itself.¹⁵ Halverson was an interesting character: by then a member of the Santa Cruz English Faculty, he had been a professional musician in earlier days; as far as I know he had no anthropological training. Halverson energetically argues his case, and has especially interesting things to say about the history of attempts to explain Paleolithic art--attempts that were by and large failures.¹⁶ He was particularly opposed to the view that cave depictions were part of the ritual of hunting magic, and that hypothesis has not grown in popularity or respectability since he wrote. He acknowledged that the earliest proponents of the art for art’s sake view had not helped their case by speaking in terms which would be better used of Victorian painting--“studio exercises” and the like--but he thought something better could be made of it.

¹⁴ For a similar view, to the expression of which over many years I am indebted, see Dutton (2009).

¹⁵ Halverson, J (1987), pp. 63-89

¹⁶ The Paleolithic or “Old stone Age” is reckoned from around 2.5mya, when the first stone tools were fashioned, until the beginning of farming. The Old Stone Age (a term generally reserved from developments in Africa) is divided into Early, Middle and Late, based on judgements about cultural innovation, while there is correspondingly a Lower, Middle and Upper Paleolithic from Europe, though the Lower Paleolithic begins much later than the Old Stone age.

He makes much of the apparent lack of composition in the images; we simply have depictions of individual animals, with very rarely any attention to relations between them, even size relations. Halverson did not know of the pictures at Chauvet cave, discovered in Southern France in 1994, which contain several drawings where animals occlude one another. In one of these cases we have, so it is argued, a depiction not of distinct animals (horses in this case) but of the same animal in different attitudes—a rather striking attempt at composition.¹⁷

Anyhow, the tendency towards the depiction of isolated objects without regard to scene or narrative suggested to Halverson a kind of “pure” pleasure in the depiction of things, without regard to symbolic function which, he suggests, would require an approach more sensitive to the relations between objects. Halverson postulates a “natural propensity” to “reproduce images of reality”, which he thinks is sufficient explanation for the depictions of this period, contrasting them with the later cave paintings of the Spanish Levant which, with their evident modes of formal composition, reflect a symbolic content. He also emphasises something I have already draw attention to—the striking naturalism of these depictions—arguing that this also suggest a pre-reflective delight in appearances.

The responses to Halverson (the editors of *Current Anthropology*, in which his paper appeared, were good enough to quite a few) were generally critical, challenging various of his supporting arguments and denying that art for art’s sake has any explanatory power in this context. Indeed, work by the South African scholar David Lewis-Williams has somewhat strengthened the idea that the cave images of the Magdalenian (and earlier in the Aurignacian, if we now include Chauvet Cave) did have strong connections to religious and magical ideas.¹⁸ They express, he argues, a belief in a hidden reality beyond the natural world, with the cave walls forming a physical boundary between the two. And these images are, says Lewis-Williams, at the same time the causal consequence of magical practices which involved the inducement of altered states of consciousness; in these states subjects experience their own mental images as projected onto surfaces, of which the paintings were then produced as a permanent record.

¹⁷ We owe this hypothesis to White, R. (2003), p.79. See http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/23/080623fa_fact_thurman

¹⁸ Lewis-Williams, D. (2002), Chapter 7.

I am not competent to assess the anthropological, archaeological and ethnographic evidence for this claim, and I am not concerned to find a version of Halverson's thesis that might survive the vindication of Lewis-Williams' claims. I want to turn attention away from the European Upper Paleolithic to a much earlier period in human prehistory and to suggest that there is at least some reason to speculate that here we have the natural home of art for art's sake—more natural, anyway, than Victorian London. But in order to treat this issue with the seriousness it deserves we need to think about what art for art's sake actually amounts to, for it seems to me that Halverson went wrong at this early stage in his reasoning.

III. WHAT IS THE SAKE OF ART?

According to Halverson, "Paleolithic art has *no* meaning,... no religious-mythical-metaphysical reference, no ulterior purpose, no social use, and no particular adaptive or informational value."¹⁹ Halverson runs a great many things together here; in particular he does not make a distinction between questions about the motivations of individuals and communities that engage in certain behaviours, and the adaptive functions--where they exist--of those behaviours. It is one thing to say that art is produced for no reason other than the sake of art--for the sake, that is, of the pleasure that making and contemplating the art affords--and another to say that there is no adaptive function fulfilled by the production of the art. Different claims, certainly: is the art for art's sake advocate committed to both of them?

"Art for art's sake" is a slogan that can and does mean many things, some of them not very determinate; there is no law to prevent us using that label for the conjunction of views just described. But that, surely, is not what Pater, Wilde and the others meant by it; they did not have any views, one way or the other, about adaptive function, and would have found the whole notion alien and distracting. The claim that first art was art for art's sake need not to be a claim about the absence of any adaptive function for art whatsoever.²⁰ The claim might instead be one simply about the *motivations* of art-makers, namely that their motivation was aesthetic rather than social, symbolic, religious or metaphysical. I shall argue that it is possible for a motivational story of this kind to coexist with positive hypotheses about the selective forces which lie

¹⁹ Halverson (1987), p.66.

²⁰ Of course it is possible that art has no adaptive functions, and various people have claimed this; my point is only that there is an interesting version of the art for art's sake thesis which is neutral on this question.

behind the motivations of art makers, forces which make it entirely proper to suppose that art has, or had, a selective function. But to see that there is in general no difficulty separating these ideas, consider a different case: sex, something for which there is an obvious adaptive function. The explanation for people having sex--the explanation in terms of motivation--will refer to factors which reflect this adaptive function in only a very small minority of cases. In other cases a "sex for sex's sake" hypothesis looks a pretty good bet. Popular misunderstandings of Darwinianism often seek some connection between the adaptive and motivational stories by suggesting that adaptive functions somehow provide unconscious motivation, but there is no reason to believe this. What happens instead is that, when there is adaptive pressure to engage in some behaviour, part of the suit of biological changes that bring that behaviour about is the provision of some felt satisfaction that accompanies the behaviour; it is the desire for that felt satisfaction which motivates, not the adaptive advantage which causes that satisfaction.

One further clarification of the art for art's sake thesis is appropriate at this point, and the clarification I am offering is not based on any interpretation of the aestheticist writers; it is meant rather as an attempt to fashion a version of the claim appropriate to present needs. Another way to put the claim is to say that art is valuable "in itself". But what does that mean? There are those who have argued that beauty is an intrinsic good, a good which exists independently of the experiences to which it may give rise, because a world with beautiful things in it is better than one without them, regardless of whether there is anyone there to experience the beauty.²¹ One could accept the claim about the relative value of these two hypothesised worlds without agreeing that beauty is an intrinsic good in this sense; the value of the world with beautiful things in it may reside in its capacity (unrealised as it happens) to produce pleasurable experiences, a capacity which the other world lacks. After all, of two worlds where people's behaviour is indistinguishable, one may possess value lacked by the other in virtue of the fact that in it, and not in the other, agents are free and so might have acted differently. What is counterfactually true of a world matters to any assessment of value in that world.²² Anyway, the advocate of an art for art's sake thesis need not

²¹ See Moore, (1903), pp.135-6. Moore expressed a different view in *Ethics*, pp. 103-04.

²² It is true that Moore, in *Principia Ethica*, made it a condition of his thought experiment not merely that no one does live in the world of beauty but that no one can live in it. But it seems to me that the intuitive force of the case he provides depends, in fact, on our seeing this world, with all its admirable beauty, as a hospitable one.

believe in the intrinsic value of art in this strong sense, and may believe instead that the value of art lies in its capacity to provide certain experiences, irrespective of whatever follows in consequence of an agent's having those experiences.²³ That is how I am understanding the thesis.

IV. WAS THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC THE TIME OF FIRST ART?

Put like that, the idea that there are instances of art to which the art for art's sake thesis applies doesn't look very controversial. But it would be more difficult to argue that the idea of art for art's sake plays some significant role in explaining the origin of art itself, and that was part of what Halverson was claiming on behalf of the Upper Paleolithic.²⁴ For a start, as long as we think of the Upper Paleolithic as the period during which art originated, we are likely to find the art for art's sake thesis a difficult one to establish. There are two reasons for that. First, while we know little about the details of people's lives in this period, it does seem to have been a period of intense cultural enrichment. It is sometimes described as a cultural "big bang" during which a qualitative shift in social organization and innovation took place which saw the growth of co-operative hunting, long-distance trading between groups, increase in population size and, at certain times, much higher densities of population, along with the development of such symbolic activities as burial-rites and the production of objects marking social distinction. In such a context there are many opportunities to argue that art developed at least in tandem with these other movements and perhaps as a means, along with magic and religion, of securing greater group solidarity and commonality of purpose than would otherwise have existed in communities under stress from climatic change. As I have indicated, arguments along these lines have been put by Lewis-Williams and others. Secondly, there is the difficulty that the art of this period is very distinctively representational art: not merely cave painting but sculpture, some of it very exquisite. And representational art may always be argued to

²³ Malcolm Budd calls this the "intrinsic value of the work of art", on the grounds that what is intrinsically valuable is an experience of the work: an experience in which the work is, as it were, given to one. Budd (1995) *Values of Art*, pp.5-6.

²⁴ Here I'm *almost* with Humphrey, who says "Would this be 'art for art's sake', as some of the first theorists of cave art argued? Not quite. But it would be art, stemming from the soul and body of the artist, offered like the song of a bird in celebration of a mystery, without the artist needing to be in any way aware of how his own sake was being served".

have some important informative function, which would undermine the art for art's sake hypothesis.²⁵

But the Upper Paleolithic did not come out of nowhere. Indeed, some scholars argue that we entirely misrepresent the period to think of it as a revolution, rather than as a further, perhaps slightly accelerated, episode in a long history of cultural accumulation that begins perhaps two hundred thousand years earlier in the Middle Paleolithic.²⁶ At Blombos Cave (Southern Cape) we have perforated shells which are most likely personal ornaments, as well as many thousands of ochre crayons, some with systematic, apparently abstract markings, all reliably dated at around 100kya.²⁷ Perforated shells claimed to have been used as beads have now been reported from North African sites dated to 82kya and 100-135kya.

Can we find evidence of aesthetic production even earlier than the perforated shells and marked crayons of 70-135kya? Pigments of various kinds are found in layers datable much earlier even than this, possibly around 400k BP, and some scholars are willing to infer their use in aesthetic activity, perhaps bodily adornment.²⁸ But the evidence here is very thin, and alternative explanations are available. There is much more solid (in all senses) evidence for aesthetic activity to be found elsewhere.

V. ONE MILLION YEARS BC

In 1789 John Frere, a Suffolk land owner, wrote to the Society of Antiquities describing stone implements discovered in a quarry at Hoxne. He did not draw attention to their appearance, focusing presciently on the vast age suggested by their position under a layer of sand and sea shells, and below the fossil remains of a large, unknown animal. They came, he surmised, from "a very remote period indeed, even beyond that of the present world".²⁹ These objects are now known as Acheulean hand

²⁵ See Mithen, S. (1988), pp. 297-327.

²⁶ For advocacy of a perhaps extreme version of this gradualism see McBrearty, S. & Alison S. Brooks, A. S. (2000). On the possibility of enhanced imaginative capacities carrying some explanatory weight in UP art, see my "The Representational revolution", and Carruthers, P. (2002).

²⁶ Balter, M. (2009), p. 569. It's notable how often any discovery of an early tendency on humans' part to take an interest in design or form is immediately described as evidence for "symbolic" activity; commenting on the Blombos find, archaeologist Paul Mellers says "There is now no question that explicitly symbolic behavior was taking place by 100,000 years ago or earlier," (quoted in Balter (2009)).

²⁷ "kya" is "thousand years ago"; "mya" is "million years ago".

²⁸ See eg Powers, C. (1999).

²⁹ Frere's discovery went unremarked and even forgotten until, sixty years later two amateur archaeologists, Joseph Prestwich and John Evans, having discovered similar artefacts on the Somme river in France, noticed Frere's hand axe at the Society of Antiquities. (Prestwich later became

axes: tools made, in this case around 400kya. Among them is a piece of worked stone, shaped as an elongated tear drop, roughly symmetrical in two dimensions, with a twist to the symmetry which has retained an embedded fossil. In size and shape it would not have been a useful butchery implement, and is worked on to a degree out of proportion to any likely use. While it may be too much to call it an “early work of art”, it is at least suggestive of an aesthetic sensibility. I suggest that we have here evidence for a very deep history of aesthetic production: a history so long that it makes the Upper Paleolithic look positively contemporary. This history extends back long before our own species emerged, long before language developed, long--apparently--before any genuinely symbolic activity of any kind. It is worth placing this development into a larger picture of the evolution of tool use among our ancestors.

The first stone tools were probably made by creatures called *Homo habilis*; we find their stone artefacts at African sites going back to 2.5mya, the so-called Oldowan technology. Before about 1.4mya we don't find anything aesthetic about them; they are simply stones on which a cutting edge has been made, with no attention to anything but practical need. It seems likely that people at this time used both the cores and the flakes cut from them, the cores for dismembering and smashing bones, and the flakes for cutting off meat.

It is with the Acheulean industry first attributed to a later species *Homo ergaster* and beginning around 1.4mya that we see objects with a deliberately and systematically imposed symmetry, created by removing flakes all over the stone's surface. Some are finely shaped, thin and highly symmetrical in three dimensions, with flakes taken off by using, successively, stone, antler and wooden implements. One elegantly elongated piece in phonolite (green volcanic larva) from Olduvai is dated at 1.2mya (British Museum, P&E PRB 1934.12-14.49); another from the same place, dated at 800kya, is an extraordinarily crafted piece of quartz with amethyst bands, a difficult material to work (British Museum, P&E PRB 1934.12-14.83).³⁰ Size and shaping are often not consistent with practical use, and indeed many such objects

Professor of Geology at Oxford.) The handaxe is at http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/online_tours/britain/enlightenment_archaeology/hoxne_handaxe.aspx

³⁰ See http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe/s/stone_handaxe.aspx and http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe/s/stone_handaxe_800,000_bc.aspx

are found with no evidence of wear. The basic hand axe style was extremely long lasting, and we find examples as late as 300kya. In addition to the standard tear-shaped hand axe there are dagger-like ficrons and cleavers with a transverse cutting blade; a recent find in the UK has located one of each, described as “exquisite, almost flamboyant”, and so placed as to suggest their having been made by the same individual; it is provisionally dated around 240kya.³¹ The obvious question is “why hominids went to all that bother when a simple flake would have sufficed”.³²

One tempting answer is that hand axe production was sometimes an investment in the creation of something pleasurable to look at, and for that a simple flake does not suffice, for human and other animals are attracted by symmetry, perhaps for good evolutionary reasons.³³ By comparison with Oldowan tools, Acheulean handaxes are highly symmetrical, though the degree of symmetry to be found in particular pieces does vary considerably from case to case.³⁴ There is a good deal of argument as to whether producing a symmetrical stone tool adds to the practical usefulness of the tool itself. But one need not deny some utility in attention to symmetry to find the degree to which certain hand axes have been made symmetric odd. And symmetry is not the only odd feature of some of these items. Some are made from materials that are difficult to work with but which, certainly to our eyes, produce a striking appearance. Some, like the axe discovered by John Frere, are too large to provide a comfortable grip—for us or for the creatures that made them--and so sharply pointed that heavy use would quickly cause them to snap at the tip. As I have indicated, we find examples where the maker has found ways to embellish the effect by giving a twist to the symmetry of the vertical axis.³⁵

VI. PERCEPTUAL BIAS

If symmetry alone were at issue we might try to explain the styling of hand axes in terms of what is called perceptual bias—a tendency to attend to and be attracted by things which, quite accidentally, mirror the features of objects it is adaptively

³¹ Wenban-Smith, personal communication. See Wenban-Smith (2004).

³² White, M. (2000).

³³ For an assessment of the view that facial symmetry is a sign of healthy development and hence an indicator of good health and good genes see G. Rhodes, G. & Simmons, L. (2007). Once again, it is to be stressed that there is an adaptive advantage in being attracted to symmetrical faces has no implications for the reasons, if any, that people would give for being attracted to symmetrical faces.

³⁴ See Stephen J. Lycett, S. L. (2008).

³⁵ See Wynn, T. (2002).

important to attend to; one simply finds symmetrical things pleasing, and so, when working a stone tool into a usable shape, there will be a tendency—not manifesting itself in all cases and to a degree inversely proportional to the urgency of the project—to overwork the object so as to produce something more symmetrical than need alone would dictate. And why should we not say that the pleasure generated by the contemplation of a thus symmetrically worked object is an aesthetic pleasure?

It is of course notoriously difficult to say what, in general, aesthetic pleasure is, and there are serious doubts about the usefulness or coherence of the category of aesthetics pleasures, attitudes or forms of attention. But I don't think it would be helpful to raise these difficulties at this point. If there is anything paradigmatic of aesthetic attention it is attention to, and pleasure taken in, the contemplation of the form of an object; that is all we need appeal to at this point, and the question whether this sort of attention is of a kind with attention to, say, representational depictions and works of narrative literature is a question we don't need to decide. If art began as the taking of pleasure in form then I don't think any advocate of the art for art's sake theory would have anything to feel disappointed about.

A theory according to which sensory bias explains the emergence of human practices of aesthetic making would do admirably as an underpinning for the idea that art begins as an exemplification of the idea of art for art's sake. As it happens, I think that sensory bias has limited capacity to explain the emergence of aesthetically worked Acheulean hand axes, because, as I have made clear, profligate symmetry is by no means the only aesthetically relevant feature we can point to in these objects, which display a range of features we tend to associate with art: the use of size and shape to give a high degree of salience to the object's lack of practical usefulness, the use of contra-standard embellishment such as deliberate violations of symmetry, choice of materials which create arresting visual effects, occasional retention within the material of a fossil which has been worked around by the stone knapper, thus providing a further display of skill. A more complex version of the sensory bias theory—one which appeals to a range of other sensory biases to which we are prone—might explain all these things. But I do not know of such a theory and will not try to develop one here.

VII. SEXUAL SELECTION THEORY

Instead I shall turn to a theory which has been proposed by Marek Kohn and Steven Mithen.³⁶ They start from the suggestion—relatively new within neo-Darwinian thinking--that *costly signals* may benefit both parties in a communicative situation, when the evident cost of the signal is a reliable indicator of some relevant quality in the signaler.³⁷ Gazelles pursued by predators may stop their flight to leap in the air; this stotting behaviour, which puts the prey at greater risk, indicates the strong likelihood that the prey is healthy enough to escape with a margin for safety; the chase—costly to both in energy and likely get the predator nowhere--may then be broken off.

If aestheticised hand axes are reliable signals, what do they signal? There is a range of possibilities here: the best known takes us from natural to sexual selection, those forces shaping reproductive advantage by conferring a certain degree of attractiveness as a mate. Axe construction requires significant spatial skills to produce a symmetrical object; skill at resource location; and time, which in turn implies general efficiency and security in social matters. Kohn and Mithen suggest that symmetrical, aesthetically wrought axe production was a means of reliably advertising these qualities to prospective mates. Supposing these creatures already possessed a tendency to like their conspecifics better if they did or made likable things, one mechanism to increase the attractions of the maker is to ensure that the products themselves are pleasing. None of this assumes that our ancestors *saw* hand axes as signs of fitness; all that is required is that they admire the handaxes in ways which enhance the maker's chance of reproducing. I emphasise (yet again) this point about the distinctness of adaptive and motivational explanations of art because even the greatest experts in the field seem occasionally to confuse them. Here the evolutionary anthropologist Richard Klein (who does not like the theory) describes the hypothesis of sexual selection as applied to hand axes:

When a female saw a large, well-made biface in the hands of its maker, she might have concluded that he possessed just the determination, coordination and strength needed to father successful offspring.³⁸

³⁶ Kohn, M. & Mithen, S. (1999)

³⁷ Work on costly signally goes back to the classic paper by Amoz Zahavi, (1975) Mate selection - a selection for a handicap.

³⁸ Klein, R. G. & Edgar, B. (2002) p.107.

In the same spirit, another critic questions “whether the brains of protohumans such as *H. erectus* were capable of such sophisticated stratagems.”³⁹ No one would argue similarly that sexual reproduction was impossible until people worked out what its adaptive value was.

In all this one might quarrel with the characterization of Acheulean artefacts as art, in which case—so the argument goes--the application of an art for art’s sake thesis to them would be tendentious. But this does not seem to me a serious objection. We may reject the view that these things are works of art in one of the stronger senses of that expression. Thus we might insist that art, rather than mere aesthetic activity, involves the embedding of the relevant activities in an appropriate social context, where there is a consciousness of one’s predecessors, the development of style, the emergence of representational and other possibilities that allow artists to move in certain directions that go radically beyond what their predecessors have done without entirely losing contact with them. I admit that it is unlikely that such things were in place in human communities half a million years ago—there is unlikely, for a start, to have been a properly articulated language, which many would regard as a requirement for the sort of cultural sophistication under discussion. But the extent to which these elements of social organization constitute the necessary conditions for art is surely controversial. We don’t *know* that the great painted caves of the Upper Paleolithic were the product of an artistic tradition, though it is very tempting to think that they were. Recall Humphrey’s thesis, according to which the cave-painters were radically different, cognitively and linguistically, from us. While I think this unlikely it would be a brave anthropologist who claimed that Humphrey’s hypothesis could not possibly be true. Suppose it, or something like it, turned out to be true and that in consequence we were obliged to treat with extreme scepticism claims to the effect that there were artistic

³⁹ Bolger, D. (2006). The same author says that that “...one must question the efficacy to survival of dedicating such considerable time and effort to the manufacture of elaborate tools that afforded little practical value apart from their possible use as sex charms,” as if sexual attractiveness was a marginal force in biological evolution. Even thoughtful commentators write as if sexual selection in animal species worked by means of practical reasoning. Here is Jarred Diamond on sexual selection in bowerbirds:

Reflect on what it means when a female bowerbird finds a male with a good bower. She knows at once that that male is strong, since the bower he assembled weighs hundreds of times his own weight. . . . She knows that the male has the mechanical dexterity needed to weave hundreds of sticks into a hut, tower or walls. He must have a good brain, to carry out the complex design correctly. He must have good vision and memory to search out the required hundreds of decorations. . . . And he must be dominant over other males . . . since males spend much of their leisure time trying to wreck and steal from each other’s bowers. . . . By comparison with bowerbirds, our efforts to identify mates with good genes are pathetic (Diamond, J. (1992))

traditions in the Upper Paleolithic; would we then say that the great cave paintings at Chauvet and at Altamira are simply not art? I think it would be much more sensible to conclude that art is capable of being produced in circumstances much more culturally attenuated than we previously thought. So I, for one, am not keen to deny that Acheulean hand axes fail to be art on account of their putative lack of the right kind of cultural context. Even if some argument or other did persuade me that art is not the right category in which to place these objects, much of interest would remain in the question we have been pursuing up till now. We could not, it is true, say that these objects deserve the label “art for art’s sake”. But in denying that these objects are art we could still hold to the view that they share significant features in common with later artefacts which we do regard as art, and that they are expressions of the same or similar underlying tendencies towards aesthetic making and appreciation as those we find exemplified in genuinely artistic products. Perhaps we would come to the surprising but not valueless conclusion that the best examples of what we have been calling art for art sake turn out to be objects which are not, after all, art works.

VIII. ART AND THE MAKING OF ART

But I have another reason for favouring the Kohn-Mithen theory over any theory based purely on the idea of sensory bias. The reason is this. I place myself alongside those theorists who hold that there is a deep connection between valuing art and valuing the activity of the artist.⁴⁰ And the Kohn-Mithen theory explains precisely this aspect of our interest in art, because it postulates a linkage between our attitude to the object and our attitude to the object’s maker. Summing up a line of thought in Hutcheson and Kant, Noel Carroll says that “a response, if authentically aesthetic, is a matter of pleasure in reaction to the appearances of things”, a pleasure unaffected by our knowledge of the thing, and indifferent even to its existence.⁴¹ I side with those who think that aesthetic pleasure, or, perhaps more narrowly, the pleasures of artefactual beauty, is very much a matter of knowledge about the thing whose appearance we are contemplating: what looks beautiful, what gives aesthetic pleasure under one set of assumptions about the object and its history will not do so under another. As Nick Humphrey puts it:

⁴⁰ See my *An Ontology of Art*. See also Davies, D. (2003).

⁴¹ Carroll, N. (2001), p. 29.

We love beauty through the medium of our senses, but at the same time what we love is obviously *not merely the sensory stimulus as such*. With cheesecake, we have only to have the stimulus on our tongue and the right affective buttons will be pressed. But with beauty it's not so straightforward. For a start we often need to be told that this *is* beauty, before we will respond to it at all... We care deeply about *genuineness and authenticity*. While we find a copy of a slice of cheesecake just as tasty as any other version, we find a reproduction of a Rembrandt less valuable—and surely less beautiful—than the original. While we enjoy the cheesecake for its gustatory qualities without thinking to ask who or what made it, we marvel at the cave paintings at Lascaux only because we believe they were made by human beings — and if it were to turn out they'd been created by a freak flood they'd become merely quaint.⁴²

Valuing art brings together product and process; what we value is the terminus of a process, rather than just a point in the space of possible surface patterns.⁴³ With some activities that fall within the arts, we would struggle even to make a distinction between process and product. A dancer does not provide us with a dance separable from the activity of dancing.⁴⁴ With other forms such as painting and music, we more naturally distinguish activity and outcome, and it is the availability of this distinction which makes it tempting to claim—erroneously, I say—that the distribution of aesthetic values is a function of outcome only. On the sort of account I favour, an interest in the aesthetics of artefacts is, for those cases where the distinction is a real one, an interest in something that unites both factors: an interest in the product-as-outcome-of-activity. That is why the aesthetic appreciation of nature *as genuinely natural* is so different from the aesthetic appreciation of art. Someone may think of nature as God's

⁴² From the outline of a book (never written, I regret to say) which argues for the essentially social nature of our interest in art: <http://www.humphrey.org.uk/papers/2004Beauty'sChild.pdf>. Humphrey is right about beauty. Is he right to contrast beauty with the enjoyment we get from tasting foods? I believe not. Here is the psycholinguist Paul Bloom: “[P]art of the joy of eating is the supposition that one is eating certain things: the food may turn to ashes in one’s mouth the moment one discovers the belief to be false, say that it is pork if one is an Orthodox Jew, or beef, if one is a practicing Hindu, or human if one is like most of us (however good we might in fact taste). Our pleasures are related to how we see the nature of things, and this includes their history, their origin. It matters where the meat has been—what it has touched, for instance—prior to ending up on your plate”. I also disagree with Humphrey that, in order to acknowledge the significance of authenticity, we need find a reproduction less beautiful than the original it reproduces.

⁴³ See Currie (1989), for extended argument. Our love for art, Humphrey says, is love for some person we conceptualise as the producer of the art.

⁴⁴ Though there may be incidental products, such as winning a contest, which are distinguishable from the activity.

creation, and hence as artefactual, but to think of nature as natural is to think of it in a way that is quite different from our thinking about art works.⁴⁵

Understanding how bound up art appreciation is with the process of production helps explain what is involved in coming to appreciate unfamiliar, even alien art forms. John McDowell says that "...it is remarkable, and heartening, to what extent, without losing hold of the sensitivities from which we begin, we can learn to find worth in what at first seems too alien to appreciate".⁴⁶ How do we learn this? Not merely by listening more attentively or looking more closely, but by hearing and looking in the light of a growing understanding of what sorts of techniques, skills and knowledge went into producing the object, against what background of pre-existing artistic achievement and constraints of style and genre.

But a question remains: why are we so attuned to the relationship between process and product? One answer is now available to us: Because our aesthetic sensibilities and skills developed under the pressure of sexual selection, which made us exquisitely sensitive to facts about the histories of aesthetic artefacts. After all, if we consider only the hand axe, torn from its context of production, it fails to provide reliable information relevant to mate selection. Hand axes, being disconnected from the body, cannot, once made, be reliably correlated with the maker, and if hand axes were sexual signals there would be a great deal of benefit to be gained by stealing them, a pattern of behaviour which would then undermine the effectiveness of the signal. In this respect hand axes are certainly different from the flagship examples of sexually selected traits such as peacock's tails, which permanently adorn the peacock itself and about which there can be no confusion of ownership. The obvious response to this is to say that the signalling occurs in the act of making, to which potential mates must attend. But this should not be understood as a denial of the importance of the hand axe itself, for what is important, on this hypothesis, about the making is that it is the making of a hand axe with certain visible properties, and the effectiveness of the act of making as a signal depends on the perceived attractiveness of the finished product.

⁴⁵ See Budd (2002), Chapter 1.

⁴⁶ McDowell (1983).

*

Genealogies of value are sometimes thought to have an undermining character: the genealogy gives support to an error theory about values of that kind.⁴⁷ The genealogy I offer is not like that; no one who accepts it should think any worse of our aesthetic practices than they did before.

⁴⁷ For an evolutionary genealogy of this kind in relation to moral value see Joyce, (2007), especially Chapter 6.

REFERENCES

- BALTER, M. (2009). 'Early Start for Human Art? Ochre May Revise Timeline.' *Science* 323 (5914): 569.
- BOLGER, D. (2006). 'Gender and Human Evolution', in S. Milledge Nelson (ed.) *Handbook of Gender in Archaeology* (Rowman: Altamira).
- BUDD, M. (1995). *Values in Art*. (Penguin).
- BUDD, M. (2002). *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- CARROLL, N. (2001) *Beyond Aesthetics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- CARRUTHERS, P. (2002). 'Human Creativity: its Evolution, its Cognitive Basis, and its Connections with Childhood Pretence.' *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 53.
- CURRIE, G. (1989). *An Ontology of Art*. (London: McMillan).
- CURRIE, G. (2004). 'The Representational Revolution' in *Arts and Minds*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- DAVIES, D. (2003). *Art as Performance*. (Oxford: Blackwell).
- DIAMOND, J. (1992). *The Third Chimpanzee*. (Harper Collins).
- DUTTON, D. (2009). *The Art Instinct*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- GREENBERG, C. (1988). 'Towards a Newer Laocoon.' *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press), Volume 1, pp.23-38.
- HALLIWELL, S. (2002). *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*. (Princeton University Press)
- HALVERSON, J (1987). 'Art for Art's Sake in the Paleolithic.' *Current Anthropology* 28: 63-89.
- HUMPHREY, N. (1998). 'Cave Art, Autism, and the Evolution of the Human Mind.' *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 8: 165-91.
- JANSON, H. W. (1995). *History of Art*, Volume 1, 5th edition, (New York: Abrams).
- JOYCE, R. (2007). *The Evolution of Morality*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press).
- KLEIN, R. G. & EDGAR, B. (2002). *The Dawn of Human Culture*. (New York: Wiley & Sons).

KOHN, M & MITHEN, S. (1999). 'Handaxes: Products of Sexual Selection?' *Antiquity* 73: 518-26.

KRISTELLER, P. O. (1990). "The modern system of the arts", first published in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1951-2, and reprinted in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays* (expanded edition, Princeton University Press).

LEWIS-WILLIAMS, D. (2002). *The Mind in the Cave*. (London: Thames and Hudson).

LYCETT, S. J. (2008). 'Acheulean Variation and Selection: Does Handaxe Symmetry Fit Neutral Expectations?' *Journal of Archaeological Science* 35: 2640-2648.

MCBREARTY, S. & BROOKS, A. S. (2000) 'The revolution that wasn't: a new interpretation of the origin of modern human behaviour.' *Journal of Human Evolution* 39: 453-563.

MCDOWELL, J. (1983). 'Aesthetic value, objectivity and the fabric of the world', in E. Schaper (ed) *Pleasure, Preference & Value*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

MITHEN, S. (2006). *The Singing Neanderthals*. (Harvard University Press).

MITHEN, S. (1988). 'Looking and learning: Upper Paleolithic Art and Information Gathering.' *World Archaeology* 19: 297-327.

MOORE, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

MOORE, G. E. (1912). *Ethics*. (London: Williams and Norgate).

PORTER, J. I. (2009). 'Is art modern? Kristeller's 'Modern system of the arts' reconsidered.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49: 1-24.

POWERS, C. (1999). 'Beauty Magic', in R. Dunbar, C. Knight and C. Power (eds.) *The Evolution of Culture*. (Edinburgh University Press).

RHODES, G. & SIMMONS, L. (2007). 'Symmetry, Attractiveness and Sexual Selection', in R. Dunbar & L. Barrett (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

SHINER, L. (2001). *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. (University of Chicago Press).

SARTWELL, C. (2000). 'Art for Art's Sake.' *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* Volume 1 (New York: Oxford University Press).

WENBAN-SMITH, F. (2004). 'Handaxe Typology and Lower Paleolithic Cultural Development: Ficrons, Cleavers and Two Giant Handaxes from Cuxton.' *Lithics*, 25: 10-21.

WHITE, M. (2000). 'The Clactonian Question: On the Interpretation of Core-and-Flake Assemblages in the British Lower Paleolithic.' *Journal of World Prehistory* 14: 1-63.

WHITE, R. (2003). *Prehistoric Art: The Symbolic Journey of Humankind*. (New York: Harry Abrams).

WILDE, O. (1891). 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism.' *Fortnightly Review*.

WULLSCHLAGER, J. (2009). "review" of Dutton's *The Art Instinct* in *Financial Times*, Saturday March 21st, 2009.

WYNN, T. (2002). 'Archaeology and Cognitive Evolution.' *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25: 389-438

ZAHAVI, A. (1975) 'Mate selection - a Selection for a Handicap.' *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 53: 205-214.