

# Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology

---

Volume 21 | Issue 1

Article 6

---

4-28-2013

## Art as Affordance

Katherine Leduc Ms.

Trent University, [serendipity120@hotmail.com](mailto:serendipity120@hotmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leduc, Katherine Ms. (2013) "Art as Affordance," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol21/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [kmarsha1@uwo.ca](mailto:kmarsha1@uwo.ca).

---

# Art as Affordance

## **Abstract**

Abstract. – This paper examines art as a property as opposed to a noun, in an attempt to answer, or nullify, the question “what is art?”. It will examine the way in which objects, observers and artists relate to one another through their materiality, how this communication may be interpreted as a type of action, and how such an action illuminates the affordance of ‘art-ness’. Concluding this discussion I will address some potential problems with the art as affordance definition by contrasting it with some of the more dominant art theories.

## **Keywords**

affordance, art, communication

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to Professor Marit Munson.

## Art as Affordance

### Katherine Leduc

The question “what is art?” makes a characteristic mistake; it assumes that art is a noun. True, the word art undoubtedly brings to mind such iconic and tangible pieces as Michelangelo’s David, Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa*. Michelangelo’s David *is* art in the same way that *Pride and Prejudice* *is* a book. But defining art as a noun is problematic. Nouns classify objects and as such, they outline a particular set of properties and characteristics unique to their classification. Art, however, is a much more fluid concept.

Beyond the aforementioned archetypal examples, what is and is not considered “art” becomes a source of contention. For instance, should artifacts be considered artworks? Is a flower a work of art? Who decides? I would like to propose that “art” is a property. More specifically, art is an affordance, inherent to the materiality of any object that is articulated through a communicative and technical process.

This paper will address and challenge the “noun-ness” of art. It will examine the way in which objects, observers and artists relate to one another through their materiality, how this communication may be interpreted as a type of action, and how such an action illuminates the affordance of “art-ness”. Concluding this discussion, I will address some potential problems with the art as affordance definition by contrasting it with some of the more dominant art theories.

#### *Materiality and Affordances*

What we must first acknowledge about an object’s potentiality for “art-ness” is its real life materiality, its physical entity.

The world, unarguably, consists of material objects. Whether human, animal, or plant we are all grounded in material form; flesh, organs, leaves, veins, water, carbon, oxygen, and so on. Anything therefore, be it a painting, a sculpture, or a word written in sand, possesses some form of materiality such that it exists within this world. In addition to such materiality, we also consist of certain qualities and properties, which complement that form. Naturally, we may have the potential for some qualities and not others, such that I may be capable of running swiftly, whereas you may not. Thus, we come to the concept of affordance.

The term “affordance” was created and defined by James J. Gibson (1979:127), as “the complementarity of the animal and the environment”. Ian Hutchby provides a concise example of Gibson’s theory,

[H]umans, along with animals, insects, birds and fishes, orient to objects in their world (rocks, trees, rivers, etc.) in terms of what he called their affordances: the possibilities that they offer for action. For example, a rock may have the affordance, for a reptile, of being shelter from the heat of the sun; or, for an insect, of concealment from a hunter. A river may have the affordance, for a buffalo, of providing a place to drink; or, for a hippopotamus, of being a place to wallow. Affordances may thus differ from species to species and from context to context (Hutchby 2001:26).

Affordances are not subject to change relative to the needs of the observer. Although the rock may be both shelter from the sun and concealment from a hunter, it does not lose its ability to be one despite the predominance of the other. What the rock can and cannot be used for, and which properties it does and does not express,

serve to define it as distinct from any other object. Thus, to put it philosophically, an object is always, simultaneously, everything that it is and everything that it is not. As Hutchby (2001:27) clarifies, “the uses and ‘values’ of things are not attached to them by interpretative procedures or internal representations, but are a material aspect of the thing as it is encountered in the course of action”. Although such affordances are not immediately apparent to an observer, they are there. Such an idea, I will suggest, has implications for defining art objects as well.

### *Art as Motion*

Many theorists, such as Gell (1998) and Kramer (2006), have addressed the inherent fluidity of art; art is “motion” or “action”, and not merely just a static thing. Take for instance, Kramer (2006:6), in her book, “Switchbacks: art, ownership and Nuxalk national identity” she says she has “come to think of ‘art’ as a verb”. In similar fashion, Gell (1998:6) considers “art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it”. In this respect, using the term “art as argument”, Kramer (2006:6) suggests,

Art as argument is both a process and an invitation to engage in dialogue. As such, it taunts and intrigues; harangues and incites reaction; incurs apology and, perhaps most important, brings recognition. Yet art also feints what it represents. It is both tangible and intangible, alienable and inalienable...The power of art lies in this shifting quality, which allows it to be many things to many different people.

Kramer restricts the idea of art as argument specifically to the Nuxalk people, and does not explore the universal implications of

such an idea. Similarly Gell (1998) advocates that “[the] evocation of complex intentionalities is in fact what serves to define artworks” (Gell 2006:229). Gell is encouraging “the provision of a critical context that would enfranchise ‘artefacts’ and allow for their circulation as artworks” (Gell 2006:234), but his statement extends beyond the problem of “art or artefact” and brings us to a place where we may examine art, not only as an object, but also as an action.

### *The Art Affordance*

How do we conceive of an object as an action? According to Gibson, an affordance “is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour. It is both physical and psychological, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (1979:129). Affordances are therefore, “properties of things taken with reference to an observer but not properties of the experiences of the observer” (Gibson 1979:137). Consider an example; anything could possess the quality or property of swiftness, but only insofar as it is given motion by some internal or external agent. A fox, moving swiftly through a field is given such motion through the force of its own will; while an object such as a book may be considered stationary until I hurl it across the room, whereby it “swiftly” moves through the air. Once the fox stops and the book lands however, the quality of swiftness is no longer apparent. Indeed, it was only by the fox’s own movement and by my throwing the book that this property was exposed. The *action* of running and moving swiftly is coupled with, and almost indistinguishable from, the *property* of swiftness. The agent and the property must occur together or else the affordance will remain imperceptible. In revealing the action of art, so too, must there be some sort of

internal or external agent to make this affordance apparent. What then, gives art its motion?

### *Motion Through Action*

According to Gell the appreciation for, and ascription of art status to an object comes about through a process which he termed the technology of enchantment (1992). Basically, art objects are beautiful (and therefore may be considered art) because they are the only objects which are “beautifully made, or made beautiful” (Gell 1992:44). Because they are made to be beautiful based on a “technically achieved level of excellence” (Gell 1992:43), they may be considered products of techniques. Here, Gell has attributed the title of art to an object by defining the process that resulted in the object’s creation. In this sense, we can begin to see how an object may acquire the properties of motion based on an idea originating in some kind of action; in this case, the execution of a particular technique. But it is not only the technique which gives an object its “art-ness”, for there is another, much more significant, component involved and that is the role of the observer.

### *The Observer*

Only an observer may appreciate the technical process that created the object. In much the same way that the fox may be said to have acquired the property of “swiftness” through its own internal will, so too, may the attribution of art to an object be created through the observer’s internal recognition of an object’s external technical process.

This internal process is limited to beautifully made or made beautiful objects, thereby omitting any and all objects of natural beauty. Nevertheless, Gell lays the foundation for our theory of art that is rooted in the discovery of an object’s affordance through a particular action, that of communication.

### *The Action of Communication*

Communication is understood to be a kind of exchange of information. If we accept this definition, it would be fair to say that communication establishes a relationship between at least two things.

In the case of person-to-person interaction, communication is accomplished through reciprocation, whereby I ask you a question and you answer, etc. This scenario does not have to be successful in order to be acknowledged as a form of communication. For instance, suppose interacting with an individual who does not speak the same language, or they do not speak at all - perhaps they are using a variety of hand signals and sign language. As the recipient of this exchange, you do not understand the communication in any way you are able to reciprocate. You can, however, acknowledge that despite your inability to comprehend the other person’s meaning they are nonetheless engaging in some form of communication. In this sense, we can see how communication does not necessarily have to be reciprocated in order to be understood as communication. But what about communication between an object and a person?

Let us look at the role of the artist. Gell (1998:23) stresses, “manufactured objects are indexes of their makers”. No matter what type of manufactured material object we are looking at we understand, even subconsciously, that the object did not just spontaneously come into existence. An individual or a group of individuals created it, intentionally or unintentionally. In this sense, the object may be said to represent or “stand in for” the creators themselves. Because such an action necessitates a concrete and existing object, it therefore has the capacity to come into contact with a

public. Such a propensity for interaction means then that any object has the ability to be considered in a communicative way, whereby an individual may utilize, contemplate or ignore its origins, functions etc.

Speaking specifically about conversation and technology, Hutchby addresses an important idea regarding communication. He says,

artefacts such as the telephone and the internet... [are those which] function primarily as technologies through which communication of certain sorts is enabled. In different ways, both of them function as channels by means of which individuals or groups can be situated in co-presence, yet an abstract form of co-presence, in which space and often also time separate the participants (Hutchby 2001:1).

Art objects function in much the same way as those of technology. They situate individuals or groups in a virtual co-presence with the artist, whereby the object itself acts as a mediator or substitute for the artist. An excellent example of such a mediated co-presence occurs with a fascinating piece of work called Ghost Clock by Wendell Castle.

*Mediated Co-Presence: An Object Standing in for an Artist*

The Ghost Clock presents to the observer a grandfather clock shrouded in white linen. However, appearances are deceiving, for the object is not a grandfather clock, but a masterfully carved piece of Hondurans mahogany wood. Initially, the observer could have one of three reactions to the piece. They could have appreciated, not appreciated, or been indifferent to the clock as a piece of "art". Having been told that the object is in fact, not what it appears to be,

the observer is forced into a silent dialogue with the artist, a kind of conversation of which they may or may not be aware.

The very creation of the piece, which mimics the real life materiality of a grandfather clock, was executed by the artist in such a manner that was undoubtedly meant to fool the observer. Even supposing that fooling the observer was not the intent of the artist, it may be said that the effective mimicry would result in the same outcome, regardless of the intent. After being duped into such a belief, the observer, now very much aware of the actual materiality of the piece, can regard the object in a new manner. Perhaps now, the observer ponders over the clever title of the piece, addressing the ways in which the piece is and is not a ghost clock, and how their changing perceptions of the piece have perhaps altered or attributed new meaning to the title. Perhaps too, they discuss with their friends whether or not such an object should be considered art, or perhaps, after this revelation, they simply leave. Whatever the scenario may be, having been told of its deceit, the observer cannot walk away from the piece without having participated in some form of communication, even if unconsciously. The role of the artist is therefore one which forces the observer to engage in a reflexive thought process which is capable of exposing an object's "art" affordance.

If we argue that man-made objects afford in their materiality the opportunity to be interpreted as indexes for an artist and their intentions, how may we ascribe similar ideas of communication to objects which have no artist? One may appreciate a painting by Monet, a pristine landscape, a rock, or a twisted tree and be affected in the same manner. In this instance we cannot argue that an artist whose intention was to have an observer challenge the object's

materiality created such material objects. Or perhaps we can, as many religious and spiritualist notions may contend, but that is not an idea to be addressed within the scope of this paper. If a tree or a rock does not act as a substitute for another individual, how can communication be possible?

“The work of art is a physical entity which mediates between two beings, and therefore creates a social relation between them, which in turn provides a channel for further social relations and influences” (Gell 1992:51). For Gell, this definition of art is derived strictly from the recognition of technical processes of made objects. I argue, however, that instead of limiting such internal exchanges between object and observer to the technical processes of made objects, I extend this theory to encompass naturally occurring objects as well. In doing so, I do not negate the significance which comes from acknowledging technical processes, because such technical processes do admittedly hold many an observer in awe, especially when examining objects of great intricacy or grandeur. Instead, I seek to acknowledge that the very communicative process, which transpires between any person and any object, has the capacity to expose an object’s art affordance. In his book, *Art as A Social System*, Niklas Luhmann (2000) addresses concepts such as perception and communication in ways that allow us to relate the process of communication to art objects.

Luhmann likens communication with internal processes such as consciousness. That is to say, we are able to understand and comprehend the external world based on our possession of an internal consciousness. He says, “communication accomplishes [consciousness] by continually reproducing the distinction between utterance (self-reference) and information (hetero-reference) under conditions that generate the

possibility of understanding” (Luhmann 2000:11). Essentially, communication acts to establish the difference between the self and external information, such that this process is continually reproduced in all of our perceptions of the world.

Unlike perception however, which “scan[s] a familiar world for information without requiring a special decision on our part to do so” (Luhmann 2000:14), communication precipitates a more reflexive thought process, forcing us to engage with an object in a manner that extends beyond mere recognition. Indeed, Luhmann acknowledges this fact when he says, “art aims to retard perception and render it reflexive” (2000:14). I contend with his use of art as a noun. When looking at an object in which one engages in a communicative thought process, one may expose the affordance of “art-ness”. Consider again the example of the book being flung through the air.

In both instances there is an external agent (a person) and an external object. The difference, however, lies in the expression of motion. Whereas the book acquires its quality of swiftness by an externally observable action such as throwing, an object acquires its quality of “art-ness” by an internalized communicative process. But perhaps this definition is somewhat broad and vague. After all, we may engage in an internal dialogue with an object regarding its structure and design without ever ascribing to it the notion of “art-ness”.

#### *Potential Problems with the Art as Affordance Definition*

To say that “art” is an affordance of any object is either a simple idea or an erroneous one. Simple, because in the right context, it seems that any object could indeed be considered an art object. Take for instance, Marcel Duchamp’s artwork the

“Fountain”, which displayed an ordinary urinal, or Andy Warhol’s infamous Brillo Box. Such everyday objects, never before considered art, suddenly became iconic representations of “art”. To consider any object a piece of art may seem to be a disenchanting notion, since it practically equates objects rendered out of skilled technical processes with a lump of mud on the ground. But I believe such disenchantment is necessary to wrench us out of the following inadequate art definitions and theories.

The Institutional art theory controls an object’s art affordance by advocating that only members within specific art communities have the right to decide when and if the object should be exposed (Carroll 2000). Historical accounts of art that “define art in terms of some historical relation” (Dickie 2000:106) only permit the exposure of an object’s art affordance if it is legitimized in concepts rooted in the past. Aesthetic approaches to art try to categorize objects as art based on notions and properties of beauty, something very subjective and value laden. If we are seeking to define art in the same way in which we define a chair, then subjective and elitist values must be laid aside. One may necessarily regard a particular kind of chair as hideous while still accepting that it is indeed a chair. Such value judgments, indeed, aesthetics themselves, have no effect on the material properties of the object.

It may also be said that art as an affordance is an erroneous theory, because, as mentioned previously, an affordance cannot be based on “interpretative procedures or internal representations” something which, it may be argued, is the inherent problem of defining art today (Hutchby 2001:27). In response to this argument, I propose that two individuals, looking at the same object, may separately

consider an object to be both art and not art, and both be correct, based on their individual context, rooted in terms of communication. As Eaton Muelder (2000:145) addresses “not all intrinsic properties of any particular object or event are considered worthy of attention” and thus,

one looks, listens, touches, tastes, smells something’s properties and considers the nature of these properties and ways in which they are arranged and otherwise related. Just which set of properties one cares about is determined by one’s culture or subculture. Wine connoisseurs pay close attention to intrinsic features of what they drink – features that may be completely overlooked by non-connoisseurs. This is not because of the metaphysical nature of wine, it is because of the cognitive set of the taster (Eaton Muelder 2000:145).

Art as an affordance may be considered in much the same fashion. An individual’s apparent “subjective” response to an object does not negate the affordance, but simply addresses whether or not it was acknowledged at the time of observation. Similarly, the recognition of an object’s affordance does not concretely determine the materiality of an object, even if it is agreed upon by many people - for example, language. A word may be used to describe any object, for example, a tree. A tree is a tree because we call it a tree. It may, however, also be called un arbre, baum or albero. Each word refers to the same object, yet each is individually distinct. The fact that the same object may have multiple and simultaneous identifiers, does not negate the materiality of the tree, or its potential to be identified in different ways at different times. What the tree “is” exists apart from



language and it is only by labeling it so that we bring it into existence as that particular thing. Art, in this respect, is exposed as an affordance relative to a language and a culture.

By acknowledging art as an affordance as opposed to one specific idea, which would in turn have to have its own rules and properties by which to abide, we open the possibility for any object to possess the capacity for art-ness. An artist may be looked at as any individual who appropriates an object in such a manner that they expose its art-ness. Objects of natural creation, such as a tree, may be photographed in such a fashion that the observer is forced to engage with its potential for art-ness.

### Conclusion

I have defined a way in which art may be considered a property as opposed to a concept in itself. Defining art as its own concept is incredibly problematic, such that objects get omitted, contested and dismissed as art based on their adherence, or lack thereof, to a certain set of characteristics and principles. By advocating that art is instead, a property, an affordance, of any object, the expression of “art-ness” is allowed to become noticeable in any object that is observed. An affordance is revealed in the course of action, and for “art-ness” to be exposed, a certain communicative process must occur between the observer and the object observed, whereby the object is considered in a reflexive thought process. If we accept this definition, it is obvious how and why some objects may be considered “art” and others not, on both individual and communal bases. Art is not a subjective opinion; it is a subject of discovery based on individual thought. An experience with an object exposes a property but it does not create it. Although it seems a less tangible property, art is nevertheless an affordance, for we may at any time see it expressed in

any object.

### References Cited

- Carroll, Noel, ed. 2000. *Theories of Art Today*. London, England: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Dickie, George. 2000. The Institutional Theory of Art *In Theories of Art Today*. Noel Carroll, ed. Pp. 93-108. London, England: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Eaton Muelder, Marcia. 2000. A Sustainable Definition of Art *In Theories of Art Today*. Noel Carroll, ed. Pp. 141-159. London, England: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gell, Alfred. 1992. The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology *In Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, eds. Pp. 40-63. New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- . 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2006. Vogel’s Net Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps *In The Anthropology of Art a Reader*. Howard Murphy and Morgan Perkins, eds. Pp. 219-235. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gibson, James, J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Hutchby, Ian. 2001. *Conversation and Technology: From the Telephone to the Internet*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

Kramer, Jennifer. 2006. *Switchbacks: art, ownership, and Nuxalk national identity*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. *Art as a Social System*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press.

Wendell, Castle  
1985. Smithsonian American Art Museum.  
Renwick Gallery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Room 203.