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Art and agency, a reassessment

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In his book *Art and agency*, Alfred Gell presents a theory of art based neither on aesthetics nor on visual communication. Art is defined by the distinctive function it plays in advancing social relationships through 'the abduction of agency'. Art objects are indexes of the artist's or model's agency. The paper examines Gell's use of agency, particularly in relation to the ritual art that is central to his argument. It looks critically at why Gell selects the term index from Peirce's triad of index, icon and symbol. I note that Peirce's approach deflects attention from signification toward the link between art works and the things they refer to. Finally I consider what Peirce meant by abduction, and conclude that while Gell makes a good case for the agency of art objects he does not explain how they function as art.

Introduction

It is now four years since the publication of Alfred Gell's posthumous book, *Art and agency*. Gell set out to construct a theory of art based neither on aesthetics nor on visual communication. Gell acknowledges the importance of form, balance and rhythm at various points in his argument, but argues they are not to be appreciated in the detached manner implied by the term 'aesthetics'. His rejection of semiotics is more radical. Drawing on Peirce's concepts of index, icon and symbol, Gell argues that art objects may

be icons or indexes, but never symbols. Indeed, he frequently treats icon and index as synonymous. The argument is dense and ingenious, and highlights many aspects of the social role of art objects that have previously been neglected. In the end, however, I consider Gell's argument is unsustainable. His efforts to exclude Saussurian symbolism have also been criticized by some of the contributors to a recent volume celebrating Gell's achievement (Pinney and Thomas 2001). In this paper I propose to recall what Peirce, Saussure and Georges Mounin wrote on index, icon, sign and symbol. Peirce and Saussure used sign and symbol in quite different fashions, while Mounin (1970) elaborated a theory of visual communication that acknowledged the special qualities of icons and indexes.[1] Armed with some basic definitions, I shall then critically re-examine Gell's argument in *Art and agency.* I shall argue Gell was correct to reject a specifically linguistic model for visual communication, but wrong to minimize the importance of cultural convention in shaping the reception or 'reading' of art objects.

Gell's approach to the anthropology of art

Gell sets out to provide an anthropological theory of art, rather than one derived from semiotics or art history. His theory is, specifically, a theory based on British social anthropology, on the study of social relationships, rather than culture (Gell 1998: 7). There are, however, two differences between Gell's anthropology and classic Radcliffe-Brownian Structural Functionalism. First, the unit of analysis is not status, reproduced as a position in a social structure. Gell's focus is on the agent, and the networks of social relationships constructed through his or her agency. Second, ritual is not misguided

behaviour that inadvertently has the effect of sustaining the social order, but behaviour to be understood in terms of the participants' own theory of agency.

Art is defined by the distinctive function it plays in advancing social relationships constructed through agency. Not all objects function as art objects. 'Agency can be ascribed to "things" without this giving rise to anything particularly recalling the production and circulation of "art"' (23).[2] Art objects can often be recognized intuitively: 'most of the art objects I shall actually discuss are well-known ones that we have no difficulty in identifying as "art"; for instance, the Mona Lisa' (7). However, art objects have three diagnostic features. They are usually made so they can be seen (24). Second, art objects are indexes of social agency. Smoke is not art, because it is a natural index of fire, unless the fire has been artificially lit, in which case smoke becomes an artefactual index (15). Art objects are further distinguished by being difficult, captivating: 'they are difficult to make, difficult to 'think', difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator' (23). 'Where indexes are very recognizably works of art, [they are] made with technical expertise and imagination of a high order, which exploit the intrinsic mechanisms of visual cognition with subtle psychological insight' (68). Anthropology is characterized by its interest in unfamiliar modes of thought. The anthropologist's task is to describe *forms of thought* which are not particularly sound from a philosophical perspective, but which are nonetheless socially and cognitively practicable (17). Art objects that function as agents in social relations constructed through ritual and magic are therefore particularly instructive for the anthropological study of art.

Existing work on anthropology of art

Gell's canon of existing work on the anthropology of art includes some six authors: Coote, Hanson, Kaeppler, Morphy, Richard and Sally Price (Gell 1998: 3, 73). The task of an anthropology of art is not, as Price (1989), Coote (1992, 1996), Morphy (1994, 1996) and other suppose, to define the characteristics of each culture's aesthetic. Gell acknowledges interesting work by Steiner (1994) and Thomas (1991) on the reception of non-Western art in the West, but argues this is not a genuine anthropology of art, since it does not study art functioning in the context for which it was created (8).

Gell rejects Morphy's (1994) definition of art, that art objects have either or both (a) semantic properties, (b) aesthetic properties, that are used for presentational or representational purposes (Morphy 1994: 655; Gell could also have cited a similar definition in Layton 1981: 4). Gell argues that aesthetic properties can only be assessed in terms of the intended effect of an art object in its context of use. He entirely rejects the notion of art as a visual code, arguing that nothing 'except language itself, has "meaning" in the intended sense' (Gell 1998: 6).

The studies of decorative art by Price and Price (1980), Kaeppler (1978) and Hanson (1983) are commended as among 'the more interesting studies which have been produced by anthropologists' (Gell 1998: 73). Hanson is however later criticized for failing to identify a specific correlation between Maori art style and Maori exchange networks.

Gell sets out his vision of the anthropology of art as follows. A programme of elucidating non-western aesthetics is exclusively cultural, whereas anthropology is a social science, not a humanity. The anthropology of art should focus on the social context

of art production, circulation, and reception, not on the evaluation of particular works. Anthropology has, from the start, been concerned with things which appear as, or 'do duty as' persons. Tylor's work on animism initiated this approach, and it continued with Mauss's work on the gift. There is thus a solid basis in anthropological theory for treating art objects in the same way. 'I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (Gell 1998: 6). Gell could here have noted the conclusion to chapter two of Layton's *The anthropology of art*: 'art objects have been seen to play a major role in the patterns of interaction which bring the political system to life' (Layton 1981: 43). But Layton continues, '*the ideas which gain tangible expression in art objects* [added italics] appear to be something more than a passive reflection *of* [original italics] the political system; they are rather philosophical reflections *on* the nature of political authority and its place in the world.' Gell categorically rejects a semiotic approach.

What's wrong with existing work?

Aesthetics

Gell's rejection of aesthetics is less radical than his rejection of art as a visual language. He does not deny that works of art are sometimes intended and received as objects of aesthetic appreciation (66), but reminds the reader that 'the "aesthetic attitude" is a specific historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of Western science… [that brought about] the separation between the beautiful and the holy' (97). Gell argues aesthetic values vary from culture to culture and are always embedded in a social framework. The anthropology of art should be interested in how aesthetic

principles are mobilized in the course of social interaction. 'Melanesian aesthetics is about efficacy, the capacity to accomplish tasks, not "beauty"' (94). Trobrianders attribute outstanding skill to superior magic, Westerners attribute it to artistic inspiration.

I find these arguments uncontroversial. Of course aesthetic values vary from culture to culture, and their effect may be construed within a different theory of being (Layton 1981: 11-19). Forge long ago documented that Abelam artists discuss form and proportion in their work, but 'the skilful artist who satisfies his aesthetic sense and produces beauty is rewarded not for the beauty itself but because the beauty… is recognized by the others as power' (Forge 1967: 82-3). Morphy later showed in greater detail how Yolngu artists are clearly concerned to produce effects on the senses which Europeans would interpret as aesthetic, but 'what Europeans interpret at a general level as an aesthetic effect Yolngu interpret as a manifestation of ancestral power' (Morphy 1989: 23).

Nor does Gell reject universals. Acknowledging Washburn and Crowe (1992), he argues (160) 'There exists what amounts to a "universal aesthetic" of patterned surface; the same symmetry configurations… turn up all over the world.' Gell attributes two functions to the formal qualities of decorative art. The world is filled with decorated objects because decoration is often an essential aspect of the technology of enchantment. Decorative patterns weave their spell because 'we can never quite understand the complex relationships they embody' (80). Relationships between the elements of decorative art are, secondly, analogous to social relationships constructed through exchange.

I disagree with Gell's discussion of aesthetics to the extent he only recognizes cases that support his own agency-oriented approach. Many other social contexts for the appreciation of form can be found in the anthropological literature. Hughes-Freeland (1997) discusses whether the Dutch introduced aesthetics to Java, or whether an aesthetic of dance already existed. The Lega of Central Africa treat ivory carvings with castor oil, polish and perfume to beautify them (Biebuyck 1973: 179). Consistent with Bourdieu's theory of taste (Bourdieu 1984), Lega objects made of ivory and well polished wood are socially the most important because they are associated with the highest grades of the Bwami association, and therefore with the most skilled and experienced leaders. Mende of Sierra Leone expect women to be beautiful, delicate, pretty and groomed. They also expect women to be kind, patient and loving. 'The Mende word *nyande* means both to be good and to be beautiful… no one can be beautiful if she doesn't have a fine character' (Boone 1993: 304). Beauty is dangerous because it is powerful, but the danger is that a beautiful Mende girl may become arrogant and narcissistic. Among the Wola of Papua-New Guinea men imitate birds of paradise and incorporate their feathers in ceremonial headdresses worn at exchange festivals. They do so not because they expect some sympathetic magic-like transference of the birds' qualities to themselves but because the dancers wish to appear virile and handsome by modeling themselves upon the birds' behaviour (Sillitoe 1988: 310-11).

The linguistic model

Thomas rightly notes in his foreword to *Art and agency* that the book is most radical, not in its rejection of aesthetics as a basis for an anthropological theory, but in its rejection of

the view that art is a matter of meaning and communication. 'Visual art objects are not a part of language… nor do they constitute an alternative language' (Gell 1998: 6). Art objects are only signs with meanings when they are used as *a part of language*, i.e. as graphic signs. Gell wishes to avoid 'the slightest imputation that (visual) art is 'like language' (14).

The stated motive for Gell's attack is the failure of structuralist semiotic anthropology in the 1970s (163). At that period, Gell writes, 'it was customary to discuss systems of all kinds as "languages"…. Art was the (cultural) "language of visual forms" (164, AG's parenthesis). Gell singles out Faris (1971) and Korn (1978) who constructed vocabularies of visual elements and grammatical rules for combining them into well-formed motifs or compositions. He objects that there is no hierarchy of levels in art equivalent to the phoneme - morpheme – syntactic structures of language. Lines, circles and zigzags are not visual phonemes. This may be a fair comment, but language is not the only form of human communication. The French semiologist Mounin (1970) made much of the unique 'double articulation' of language just as Saussure, the founder of semiology, emphasised the distinctive arbitrariness of the association of sounds in language and the prototypes they denote.

In fact, just as Gell accepts the study of aesthetics where it can elucidate the power of art objects as agents, so he concedes there is some value in a semiotic approach, provided it does not rely on a linguistic model. 'No reasonable person could suppose that art-like relations between people and things do not involve at least some form of semiosis; however one approaches the subject there seems something irreducibly

semiotic about art' (14). Gell uses the terms meaning and semiosis imprecisely. I return to these issues after outlining Gell's theory of agency.

Agency

Gell defines agency in the following terms:

> Agency is attributable to those persons (and things, see below) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences… events caused by acts of mind or will or intention…. An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe (Gell 1998: 16, his parenthesis).

On the face of it, art objects cannot therefore be agents in themselves, but act merely as extensions (indexes) of their maker or user's agency. As Gell writes, art objects are not self-sufficient agents, but secondary agents that have effect by virtue of being enmeshed in social relationships.

Although Gell does not cite an authority for his use of the term 'agency', it is noteworthy that Giddens saw an intimate connection between agency and power. For Giddens, agency does not refer to people's intentions but to their ability to act. Agency is the ability to act in particular ways, where more than one course of action is possible. One ceases to be an agent if one can no longer make a difference, in other words, where only a single course of action is practically available (see Giddens 1984: 9, 15). Each of the various forms of constraint simultaneously enables someone else to exercise agency (Giddens 1984: 173). Gell emphasizes the ritual efficacy of art; the ability of designs to entrap the recipient in competitive exchange, to dazzle the opposing warrior or deflect evil spirits, all of which contribute to an argument for agency as power.

The idea of art objects as social agents is not new. 'We will not attempt to reduce the ideas and values given expression in art objects to a servile reflection of social interaction, but rather assess their impact as agents of an ideology upon the form of social relations' (Layton 1981: 43; see also Wolff 1981: 24-5). The difference lies in the type of agency attributed to art objects.

How does an art object extend its maker's or user's agency? Gell argues that causal chains initiated by agents come into being as states of mind and are oriented to the states of mind of other actors. If the initiator and recipient do not come into contact, the initiator's agency must be mediated by physical objects. We detect their agency in the disturbances they leave in the material world. A stone chipped in a suggestive way attracts our attention because it may be a prehistoric tool and therefore an index of ancient agency. Kula objects are ultimately attached to powerful persons, but circulate well beyond their physical reach. Kula valuables associated with a participant's name are indexes of his bodily presence. Gell identifies four types of agency that art objects can possess. Sometimes the agency is psychological, as when a spectator is impressed by technical excellence or erotically aroused. Sometimes the art object's agency is physical, as when a supplicant is cured by kissing a religious icon. Works of art are sometimes intended and received as objects of aesthetic appreciation; they may, indeed, sometimes function semiotically, but Gell specifically rejects the notion that they always do (66).

People and things are only agents if there is a recipient (a 'patient') for them to act upon. Patients enter into a social relationship with the index, the art object. The art object in turn refers to a prototype (such as an historic individual, or a deity), either by representing it iconically (Samuel Johnson by Joshua Reynolds) or by an indexical

association – such as a stone cast as a thunderbolt by the deity. Chapter 3 of *Art and agency* is a highly original and extremely methodical working through of the permutations offered by the relationships between these four terms. The fundamental question is, then, *how* indexes or icons have agency, how they mediate the interaction of states of mind. Gell cites land mines as agents of the evil intent in the minds of Pol Pot's soldiers (Gell 1998: 21). Pol Pot's soldiers used them as extensions of their own agency. This is a misleading parallel. Art objects do not have the same kind of agency as man traps or poisoned arrows. If Pol Pot's soldiers had spent their time burying pictures of the Mona Lisa, or even pictures of Pol Pot, there would not be so many Cambodians whose lives today have been ruined by shattered limbs. Nor is Gell's book illustrated with diagrams of land mine firing mechanisms, breech-loading cannon, etc., but rather with reproductions of paintings, sculptures, tattoos and decorative designs.

Index and icon

Gell draws on Peirce's theory of semiotics to characterize the way in which art objects function as social agents. Gell uses the technical term 'index' instead of 'art object.' The index characterizes the distinctive way in which art relates some object to a social agent. 'An 'index' in Peircean semiotics is a 'natural sign'… from which the observer can make a *causal inference* of some kind, or an inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person' (Gell 1998: 13). Smoke is an index of fire, of the agency of the fire-lighter.

The naturalness of the index is crucial to Gell's escape from a linguistic model. In Peirce's theory the index was one of three types of sign: index, icon and symbol,

classified according to the way in which they are linked with the object - Gell's prototype (Peirce 1955: 100-109). An index refers to an object by virtue of being really affected by that object. A sundial is an index of the time of day, a weathervane an index of wind direction. An iconic sign, such as a picture of a horse, or an onomatopoeic sound (woof, neigh), has some of the same characteristics of the thing it denotes. An icon is a sign of an object to the extent that it is like that object. A Peircian symbol is arbitrarily associated with what it denotes, and this is the case with the vast majority of the words in any language. The link between the word [symbol] and the object is wholly established by convention.

Gell is clearly using *index* in the way it was defined by Peirce and Morris. So too in his use of *icon*: 'I believe that iconic representation is based on the actual resemblance in form between depictions and the entities they depict' (Gell 1998: 25). While *symbol* does not figure much in Gell's argument, he does use it in the Peircian sense. 'I do not believe that iconic representation is based on symbolic "convention" (comparable to the "conventions" which dictate that "dog" means "canine animal" in English)' (25).

Conflation of index and icon

Gell decided to avoid not only a linguistic model, but also any appeal to the role of culture in educating the eye (Gell 1998: 2, quoting Price 1989). Index, icon and symbol can therefore be ranked in order of decreasing usefulness to Gell. The index and icon have an intrinsic connection with the objects they denote, unlike the Peircian symbol, which depends entirely on cultural convention. 'A symbol is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas' (Peirce

1955: 102). A symbol is no use to Gell. An icon is also relatively unhelpful, because it is never identical to its prototype, a point that Gell glosses over with a couple of passing remarks: 'without pausing to unravel the very difficult question as to the nature of the relationship between real and depicted persons' (15). 'It is true that some "representations" are very schematic…. Recognition on the basis of very under-specified cues is a well-explored part of the process of visual perception' (25). Iconicity in art, the resemblance between an art object and its prototype, is mediated by cultural convention. This process is, in my assessment, both central to a comparative anthropology of art and irredeemably cultural (Layton 1981, chapter 4). Rather than address the issue, Gell circumvents it by treating icons as a subset of indexes.

> One may need to be told that a given index is an iconic representation of a particular pictorial subject (26).
>
> Prototypes: entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily (27).
>
> 'iconic'… that is, indexes physically resembling a prototype (97).

The clearest conflation of index and icon occurs in Gell's discussion of Lucretius. Gell proposes that the convergence of images (icons), and parts (indexes) of things, can be approached from a philosophical angle through the doctrine of 'emanations', which '"primitive" people anticipated, in their confusion' (Gell 1998: 104). This Epicurian doctrine was clearly stated by Lucretius: idols (simulacra) of things are like films peeled off the surface of things, which fly to and fro through the air. 'Pictures of things… are emitted from things off their surface,' like the smoke which logs of wood emit (*De Rerum Natura* 4: 26, quoted Gell: 105).

There is something special about the index because, according to Peirce, an index 'necessarily has some quality in common with the object' (prototype) (Peirce 1955: 102). Unlike the connection between a word and the thing it denotes, the link is not constructed by cultural convention. 'Indexes are not part of a calculus (a set of tautologies, like mathematics) nor are they components of a natural or artificial language in which terms have meaning established by convention' (Gell 1998: 13). A Kula valuable 'does not "stand for" someone important, in a symbolic way; to all intents and purposes it *is* an important person in that age, influence, and something like "wisdom" inheres in its physical substance… mind and reality are one' (231). Sometimes the index really is a person, as when a child is possessed by a deity (67).

Sense and reference

The distinction between sense and reference was identified by Frege. Saussure's primary concern was with sense, or signification: how sounds are conventionally related to ideas in the structure of the language. Peirce, on the other hand, classifies signs according to the way they refer to objects in the environment. 'To refer is what the sentence does in a certain situation and according to a certain use. It is also what the speaker does when he applies his words to reality' (Ricoeur 1976: 20). Peirce's approach is therefore more appropriate to Gell's aims than is Saussure's. However, sense and reference are difficult to discuss in isolation. Saussure is clearly writing about reference when he describes spoken language as arbitrary in the sense that words do not rely on onomatopoeia, but on purely conventional sounds (Saussure 1959: 69). Equally, Peirce takes sense into account when he writes, 'the sign stands for something, its object…. Not in all respects, but in

reference to a sort of idea' (Peirce 1955: 99). Saussure is also ambiguous in his example

of what he calls a symbol, 'the symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced

by just any other symbol, such as a chariot' (Saussure 1959: 68). While he apparently

intends that the idea of a pair of scales is a metaphor for balanced judgement, he might

also have intended that justice could be represented by a picture (an icon) of a pair of

scales. Gell's tendency to downplay sense is consistent with his critique of structuralism

and the linguistic model, but it is difficult to see how a discussion of both reference and

sense can be avoided, if art is about the ability to influence minds.

Abduction

In order to avoid treating art as a medium of communication, Gell introduces the term

abduction. ' "Art-like situations" can be discriminated as those in which the material

'index' (the visible, physical, "thing") permits a particular cognitive operation which I

identify as *the abduction of agency*' (Gell 1998: 13). Abductions are inferential schemes,

and we infer the same type of agency in a real and a depicted person's smile (15). The

inference is based on a supposition. Abduction was defined by Eco, following Peirce, as

the process that occurs when 'we find some very curious circumstances, which would be

explained by the supposition that it was a case of some general rule, and thereupon adopt

that supposition' (Eco 1976: 131, citing Peirce 1931-1958: 2.624, quoted Gell 1998: 14).

People act as if there were rules but art, unlike language, does not depend on

conventional rules.

Gell illustrates the process of abduction with an example taken from Lévi-Strauss,

in which a Dakota Indian, described energy gushing forth through matter, making or

leaving things each time it stops (Gell 1998: 248-9). This is strikingly similar to the Pitjantjatjara theory of being (Layton 1995). The things left by a supernatural agency become indexes of the agent's creativity (Gell 1998: 249). Similarly Maori meeting houses, according to Thomas, 'were *not* "symbols"… but vehicles of a collectivity's power. They simultaneously indexed a group's own vitality and ideally or effectively disempowered others' (Thomas 1995: 103, cited Gell 251). The whole thrust of Gell's argument is thus to get away from signification and establish a real, material link between the art object, as index, and its prototype, the primary agent.

Agency, not signification

Gell recognizes the difficulty of replacing a theory based on art objects as visual signifiers with one based on art objects as agents. 'To assert… the idol is not a "depiction" of the god, but the body of the god is all very well, but I accept that any such assertion constitutes a paradox' (99). There are two principal stages in Gell's theory of agency in art. The first considers agency in individual objects, the second considers the artist's œuvre as an aspect of his social identity.

The individual object

Gell's theory of agency is directed toward the way in which actors' states of mind are altered. Causal chains initiated by agents come into being as states of mind and are oriented to the states of mind of other actors. Abduction is a cognitive operation. The agency of art objects therefore derives from the way in which they affect the mind of the recipient (the patient).

Gell's first step is to cite Frazer's theory of magic. The power of the icon is exemplified through what Frazer called homeopathic magic. Homeopathic magic aims to destroy an enemy by destroying an image of him, or cure someone by giving them medicine made of healthily-coloured objects (Frazer 1994: 29). The power of the index is exemplified by contagious magic. Contagious magic works on fragments a person gives off, such as hair or nail clippings (Frazer 1994: 37). 'The kind of leverage which one obtains over a person or thing by having access to their image is comparable, or really identical, to the leverage which can be obtained by having access to some physical part of them' (Gell 1998: 105).

During the 1960s, around the time Gell and I were students, there was a debate about the difference between ritual and science, and how best to render magical actions rational (Lienhardt 1961, Goody 1961, Horton 1960, 1964; Beattie 1966). Gell cites one of the principal contributors. Beattie criticized Frazer for attributing causal intentions to magical practices. Beattie argued magic is in fact symbolic or expressive. He concluded that spirit mediums among the Nyoro put on a dramatic performance that was satisfying in its own right as a theatrical representation of the everyday hazards of Nyoro life, and not intended to change them (Beattie 1966:72).Gell challenges Beattie's attempt to deny a means-end relationship in ritual or magic: 'Magic is possible because *intentions cause events to happen in the vicinity of agents*' (Gell 1998: 101, Gell's emphasis). Magic registers and publicizes the strength of desire and therefore has an effect, just as Gell's desire for a boiled egg causes the egg to be cooked. If one were taking a semiotic approach similar to that advocated by Beattie, contagious magic would become a case of metonymy: calling the whole by the name of a part to dramatize the enemy's suffering.

But Gell rejects this: 'These exuviae do not stand metonymically for the victim; they are physically detached fragments of the victim's "distributed personhood"' (104). Like the classic Peircian index, the nail clipping is an index of the person as smoke is of fire. A Malangan funerary carving is a skin for the deceased (Cf. Lucretius), which creates new skins in the memories of the onlookers. 'Thus memory becomes a socially engineered medium for the transmission of the power to change the world' (227). According to Gell, all this happens without visual communication.

Gell then moves to a more complex case, the worship of images. Because 'fertility can be represented – i.e. objectified in an index – it comes under the control of those who control the index, the priests' (107). Hindu images are worshipped to gain blessing (*darshan)* that is conveyed through the eyes of the image [icon]. Ancient Indian philosophers held that the eyes send out invisible beams. Darshan is 'the gift of appearance' imagined as a material transfer. Some Indian philosophers compare darshan as 'seeing' to the way the blind use a stick to ascertain the shape of objects. In relation to images, there is thus no distinction between similarity and contact (i.e. icon and index).

Freedberg asked whether religious and other images are efficacious because the rituals of consecration have endowed them with power, or because they are images linked by mimesis to what they represent. Freedberg chose the second solution and argued they are images with signifying functions (Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998: 150). Gell acknowledges Freedberg's very pertinent objection that collapsing art objects into real persons risks losing sight of the specificity of art but opts for the first, on the tendentious grounds that the anthropologist deals primarily with human beings themselves playing a role, rather than portraits and effigies. He goes on to discuss a case where the deity is

embodied in a living person, a living icon. The transition between a person and an image is 'insensible'; the position they occupy in networks of agency 'may be regarded as almost entirely equivalent' (153).

Gell claims the Tylorian concept of animism can be made more serviceable if it is removed from its pejorative Victorian context. Nonetheless I find this stage in Gell's argument embarrassingly prone to recapitulate the twin Victorian strategies of 'If I were a savage', and 'The western child is like the adult savage' (see Gell 1998: 125, 129, 134). Gell's strategy of asking how people believe art objects have agency is, however, a useful one. The Lucretian doctrine of images as cast-off skins is similar to the Australian one of increasing a species by rubbing or smoking the rock (or painting) which is the transformed body of the totemic ancestor. It is a different causal theory to ours, based on a different ontology. Within the Aboriginal theory of the interchangeability of energy and matter (Layton 1995) increase rites are not symbolic, but rely on cause and effect. I agree with Gell, contra Beattie, *if* the aim is to understand another theory of being, and how it is worked out in practice. Following Horton, Frazer's mistake was to assume there was no theory of being underpinning magic. In religious thought, Horton argued, social relations are taken as the model on which the working of the world is conceptualized. This is preferred in societies where social relations provide 'the most markedly ordered and regular area of their experience' (Horton 1964: 99). Horton's theory of religion implies people attribute agency to sculptures because they have a religious explanatory model of how the world works, that the world is animated by human-like agencies. In these circumstances, the position a person and an image occupy in networks of agency may indeed be regarded as similar, if not almost entirely equivalent.

If one wants to go beyond cultural relativism, a provocative philosophical and moral problem is encountered. Do we take an Enlightenment view that our explanation is superior to theirs, or a post-modernist view that all theories of being are equal, and only power enables one to prevail over others? Lienhardt's solution was to focus on examples where influencing the participants' state of mind was, from both a Western and an indigenous point of view, intrinsic to the success of the action but, like Beattie, Lienhard considers the result (such as peace between warring clans) is achieved by dramatizing the desire.

Gell acknowledges that people in non-Western cultures can tell the difference between an image and a person. Many cases of skepticism among the illiterate and uneducated have been recorded; 'the devotee does *know* that the image of the god is only an image' (Gell 1998: 118). If it were to move or speak that would be a miracle. Argenti gives a pertinent example from the Cameroon Grassfields. The potter Elizabeth Nbwe Sonjonka explained to Argenti that she could not make anthropomorphic forms because, 'Woman bears life; how [why] will she then model it? To say one is like God – that is a bad thing' (Argenti 1995: 89). But this puts into question Gell's claim that the position a person and an image occupy in networks of agency can be considered almost entirely equivalent. Why bother with images, if people will do? Why not have someone sit or lie motionless in the place of a statue of the Buddha? Why not station people along the roadside to shout at each passing car 'road works ahead, elderly people crossing'?

The artist's œuvre

In contrast to the problems with the first stage in Gell's argument about the agency inherent in art, I find his second stage brilliantly convincing. Agency derives from a position in a network in social relationships. Since we are constructed by our social relationships, our inner personhood replicates what we are externally (compare Myers 1986). Personal agency creates the distributed art objects that belong to the corpus; our mind becomes manifest in the objects, traces and leavings we generate during our lifetime. There is a structural isomorphy between something internal – mind or consciousness – and something external, the aggregate of artworks (Gell 1988: 222). The circulation of indexes steadily transforms agents' conscious experience. The right to produce a Malangan sculpture, for example, *indexes* a wider bundle of rights, including land rights (Cf. Morphy 1991: 57-74 on rights to produce bark paintings depicting totemic ancestors). Stage two of Gell's argument can stand independently of stage one. It is consistent with Peirce's theory. Peirce regarded an algebraic formula as an icon 'in that it makes quantities look alike which are in analogous relations to the problem' (Peirce 1955: 107).

Despite having rejected the relevance of culture for an anthropological theory of art, culture becomes central to Gell's argument in chapter 8. This may be is an inconsistency Gell would have dealt with if he had had longer to revise the book, but I think Gell is here using culture in a different sense to the one earlier rejected. Gell appears to use culture as a way of describing the characteristic way a community organizes its social relationships; a way of *doing* things which demands agency. The style of an art tradition maps out, and can be used to manipulate, social relationships. Gell cites

Fernandez (Gell 1998: 153). Fernandez reported that among the Fang the production of aesthetically pleasing carvings is an aspect of culture, and is less valued than bringing about harmony in social relations (Fernandez 1973: 194 –6).

Gell exemplifies this approach through an extended discussion of Marquesan art and social exchange. Marquesan art was not representational in the Western sense of depicting objects that existed independently of the art, but a ritual art intended to make the bearer powerful and invulnerable. The limitless variations on recognizably Marquesan themes within the art shows however a passion for creating difference which parallels, or has an 'elective affinity' (219) with the social differences created through exchange. Individual art works do not signify social status, they merely advertise their standing as variant parts of the whole, the corpus of Marquesan art, through their recognizable style.

Index, icon and cultural convention

Gell makes a good case for art as agency, but not for agency as art. To understand the type of agency characteristic of art, we need to study the distinctive way in which paintings and carvings affect people. An argument that art objects have the same kind of efficacy, or function in the same way as land mines, cannot be sustained. In what ways is agency mapped out through social relations by means of art objects? The distribution of commissioned paintings and sculptures – Michaelangelo's Holy Family and Last Judgement, the Pope's Tomb and the Sistine Chapel – do not map out agency in the same way that Hitler or Stalin's agency was mapped out in the death camps, the gulags, the ebb and flow of huge armies. Nor does art map agency in the same way that the career of a

powerful industrialist is mapped through the sale of commodities, construction of factories and the employment of thousands of workers. Of course, the Renaissance Church's power and wealth is manifest in the distribution of Michaelangelo's work. Like Marquesan art, Nazi propaganda posters and the art of Soviet socialist realism also map a parallel course to social action, but a picture of valiant workers does not affect the viewer in the same way as a day's work in the Siberian salt mines. The difference is similar to the difference between a powerful electric shock and the notice attached to a fence depicting a figure falling back under the blow of a jagged flash of electricity. The first is brute energy, the second is coded information. Art objects can be related to their primary agents (the artist, patron and prototype) because, to the competent viewer, they embody pertinent information.

Gell is right to argue that icons and indexes, unlike spoken words, are not entirely dependent on conventional, cultural structures. They are not, however, entirely natural signs. Icons, and the indexes embodied in art, do depend on cultural convention. It is clear from several of Gell's examples that the significance of indexes depends on cultural convention. Gell cites Turner's ethnography of tree saps used in Ndembu ritual as an intrinsic indexical form of agency. Blood coloured sap cures menstrual dysfunction. Yet he continues: 'The most common case is for the material index to dictate its form simply on the basis of traditional knowledge' (29), surely a property of culture or habitus. Turner's work on Ndembu colour symbolism (Turner 1962a, 1962b, 1965) makes the importance of cultural context very clear. Gell writes that where an idol is an artefact rather than a natural object, 'the nature of agency exerted by the prototype is to cause the

artist to produce a *religiously stipulated* image according to the **conventions** for such images' (99, Gell's italic; my bold).

Icons are different from indexes. Icons are not a product or part of the prototype. Icons resemble their prototypes but are not identical to them. 'The semantic rule for the use of icons is that they denote those objects which have the characteristics they themselves have – *or more usually a certain specified set of their characteristics'* (Morris 1938: 24, my emphasis). Here, too, culture intervenes. 'The way in which such dissimilar reptiles as tortoises and lizards have become visually synonymous in Marquesan art partly reflects their similar symbolic associations' (Gell 1998: 180n). The image must often 'look like' what it represents, but according to cultural convention. Totemic art in northern Australia, and on the Northwest Coast of North America, illustrates this well (Boas 1955: 186-209; Morphy 1991: 155-164; Taylor 1996: 147-168). To paint or carve another group's totem would be to claim their land. Gell asserts: 'culture may dictate the practical and/or symbolic significance of artefacts, and their icongraphic interpretation, but the only factor which governs the visual appearance of artefacts is their relationship to other artefacts in the same style' (Gell 1998: 216). This may be true of Marquesan art, but it is demonstrably not the case where two or more art styles co-exist in a community. Lawal's study of Yoruba art styles includes good examples (Lawal 1985). The difference between silhouette and geometric art among the Yolgnu, or 'x-ray' and geometric infill in Western Arnhem Land rock art, is partly a matter of stylistic convention but it also relates importantly to the kind of information the art is intended to convey (Morphy 1991: 176-180; Taylor 1996: 224-238).

When Gell does write about meaning and semiotics, he is in fact sometimes discussing reference. 'Where geometric forms occur as graphic signs, they are meaningful in themselves (a circle can represent an eye)' (Gell 1998: 165). Representation is the means by which icons refer to objects, Gell's prototypes. Broadly speaking, there are two types of reference. Peirce's definition of index, icon and symbol are based on the way signs refer to objects (a circle can look like an eye). Eco extends Peirce's approach in his analysis of textual interpretation. A text refers to a universe of discourse, and thereby eliminates some possible misreadings (Eco 1990: 28 and 60, compare Ricoeur 1991: 93 and see also Layton 2000). Gell is alluding to the second type of reference, reference to an artistic discourse, in his analysis of the relation of individual objects to the stylistic tradition of Marquesan art. He writes, 'this is the sense in which any part "stands for" the whole' as in synecdoche…. "Representing" in this sense is clearly a semiotic relation, in which the object is a sign, and the corpus of stylistically related objects from which it is drawn, is what is signified thereby' (Gell 1998: 166). This impoverishes the notion of signification.

One of Gell's fundamental objections to the linguistic model was its reliance on Structuralism. He condemned the Structuralist semiotic anthropology of the 1970s for constructing vocabularies of visual elements and grammatical rules for combining them into well-formed motifs or compositions. However, his conclusion to the Marquesan case study is that the multiplicity of variant forms 'suggest an overwhelming need to establish difference and a recognition of the merely *relative* character of all differences' (220). This surely a Structuralist proposition! Shortly afterwards, Gell refers to 'the structural

isomorphy between something "internal" (mind or consciousness) and something "external" – aggregates of artworks' (222).

  Gell writes 'Semiotic/interpretative theories of art give prominence to the fact that what a person sees in a picture, or, even more, gleans from an utterance or a text, is a function of their previous experience, their mind-set, their culture, etc.'(33). He construes this approach as a denial of the intrinsic agency of art objects, implying that it stems from the postmodern argument that the reader or viewer can make whatever they choose of objects in a gallery. The connection with current western notions of individualism is, as he says, obvious. But this is not adequate to dismiss the semiotic argument that *even to construe the artist's agency correctly* the viewer must rely on 'their previous experience, their mind-set, their culture.' Campbell spells this out very clearly in her analysis of the art on Vakutan Kula canoes. The process by which specific animals in the Vakutan environment are represented is mimetic. The system by which form and meaning converge is symbolic, the means aesthetic (Campbell 2001: 133). In chapter four of *Art and agency,* Gell criticizes western misunderstandings of West African nail fetishes. He writes, 'the apparent rhyme between these carvings and Western images of suffering and violation is fortuitous' (59). The point is that we interpret them according to our experience of the Christian tradition, whereas those who were intended to view them rely on their own cultural tradition. Recent work on the anthropology of landscape makes it very clear that signs of agency in landscapes are construed according to the habitual understandings gained through life in a distinctive cultural tradition (Strang 1997, Layton 1997 and papers in Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995 and Bender and Winer 2001).

Abduction is a concept taken from semiotics. As defined by Peirce, and used by Eco, abduction says nothing about the presence or absence of rules. It characterizes the logical procedure a person can adopt when they *think* they have detected a pattern in events and act upon that supposition. 'the logic of interpretation is the Peircian logic of abduction. To make a conjecture means to figure out a Law that can explain a Result' (Eco 1990: 59). Eco quotes two examples from Peirce. One is a purely statistical question of probability concerning bags of coloured beans. The other reads as follows: 'I once landed at a seaport in a Turkish province; and… met a man on horseback, surrounded by four horsemen holding a canopy over his head. As the governor of the province was the only personage I could think of who would be so greatly honoured, I inferred that it was he. This was an hypothesis' (Eco 1976: 131, citing Peirce 1931-1958: 2.265). It would be a matter of further investigation to discover whether an elaborate protocol of coloured canopies, numbers of attendants etc. existed to signal status, or whether the governor, on a whim, used his superior authority to call up four horsemen to shelter him from the sun on a particularly hot day (see also Keen 2001: 32-3).

The essential differences between art and language hinge on such questions of convention and formalization. Gell is probably right to argue that the most clearly structured art systems are those which closely mirror language, such as the road signs of the highway code, or the conventional motifs for house, tree, road and river on maps. But even here, art has different properties to language. We can construe a new and unfamiliar road sign such as 'elk crossing road ahead' as soon as we encounter it. The style of the silhouette and the red triangle refer us to the discourse of road signs, but the black silhouette in the warning triangle edged with red has an iconic resemblance to a large

animal found in Scandinavian forests (compare Mounin 1970: 20 on reading the Michelin Guide). We need to know the stylistic conventions of the Highway Code, but do not need to speak Swedish. When we hear new slang expressions, on the other hand, we have to observe their use in particular contexts (what they refer to), and their opposition to other terms in the structure of the language. We can read a map in two dimensions and take in the merits of alternative routes, whereas a spoken set of directions gained from a local inhabitant unfolds through time (Mounin 1970: 35).

Mounin attached particular importance to the unique 'double articulation' of language, the distinction between phonemes and morphemes (Mounin 1970: 43-44, 52, 74). The existence of a range of sounds (phonemes), which can be combined into a far larger range of meaningful units (morphemes/words) gives language its unique richness as a medium of communication. Gell rightly argues that icons and indexes lack this double articulation. Mounin distinguishes between systematic forms of communication such as language, musical notation and marine signal flags, and apparently non-systematic forms such as the plastic arts and advertisements. Communication through non-arbitrary signs does not require the same degree of systematization as language. Icons do not need to be chopped into discrete units; the width of a river on a map can vary continuously, according to the width of the river itself. Advertisements may use a range of colours to catch the consumer's eye; a series of different advertisements can entice the consumer into buying the same product. A photograph of a refrigerator can choose a variety of products to advertise its capabilities (Mounin 1970: 38). In the face of uncertainty about the nature or precision of rules, abduction may be the appropriate mode of interpretation, but some art traditions are more highly structured than others.

Semiology originated, not in linguistics, but in Durkheim's (1915) analysis of central Australian art. As an unrepentant semiologist, I believe the distinctive features of art that Gell has demonstrated cannot be explained by denying its status as visual expression, but rather by recognizing the inapplicability of a specifically linguistic model.

8145 words (including endnotes, excluding précis)

NOTES

1. Françoise Barbira-Freedman introduced me to Mounin's work in the early 1970s but, although it inspired an unpublished paper on rituals in the French village which I studied for my Ph.D. this is the first time I have used Mounin's ideas in a paper (submitted for publication).

2. References to Gell's work are from Gell 1998 *Art and agency* unless specified otherwise.

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