

INTRODUCTION

ADVENTURES IN THE ART NEXUS

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Visceral Reactions

Participants at the symposium, '*Art and Agency*: Ten Years On', held in Cambridge at the end of 2008, will remember one of the succession of animated debates that took place during the proceedings. Towards the end of the day, a prominent anthropologist sitting in the audience rose in excitement in response to the final paper. 'I'm sorry,' she began, 'but I'm having a visceral reaction to what you've just said!' Minutes later she was joined by another colleague who professed to feel the same, and there ensued a robust exchange between them and the speaker at the front of the room.

While this particular exchange centred on social scientific portrayals of prehistoric society, the phrase 'visceral reaction' aptly characterized both the symposium and the theory around which it revolved. *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell's 'anthropological theory of art', is the sort of book that has consistently, perhaps deliberately, incited intense responses in its readers. Whether positive or negative, such responses are rarely insipid or noncommittal, but passionate to a degree seldom seen in academia. Since its posthumous publication in 1998, Gell's book has elicited both fervent acclaim and strident criticism, and become virtually mandatory reading in artefact-oriented disciplines across the social sciences and humanities. Today, the observation that 'objects have agency (as Alfred Gell shows)' is almost axiomatic in such fields. But what exactly does this entail? And is it 'a Good or a Bad Thing'? On this point, consensus has yet to be obtained: *Art and Agency* began as, and continues to be, a controversial piece of work.

A 'demanding book' (Thomas 1998: xiii), Gell's final work begins with a provocation: a challenge to extant approaches to the anthropology of art which, he argues, have become shackled by an obsession with

aesthetics. He posits instead that a proper anthropology of art should take place within the ‘socio-relational matrix in which [art] is embedded’ (Gell 1998: 7). In this way, he proposes to treat art as ‘a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it’ (*ibid.*: 6).

Thus equipped, Gell takes the reader on an intense, sometimes mind-bending, exploration of art, agency, personhood, objecthood, cognition, temporality and creativity. Here, *nkisi* ‘power figures’, religious icons, aging Toyotas and landmines jostle freely with oil paintings, tattoos and Marcel Duchamp’s compositions as potential ‘art-objects’ that connect – or even act *as* – persons. Somewhere along the line, ‘aesthetics’ creeps back in under a different guise as a vital feature of transformation and creativity. By this stage, however, so many commonsense notions have been destabilized that – for some critics, at least – this is more a strength of the theory than a contradiction. At its close, the book is no longer just about ‘art’, but has morphed into a whole new theory of personhood, materiality, cognition and sociality. Many scholars find this prospect irresistibly exciting. Others have denounced it as verbose claptrap.

When we first discussed holding a symposium to mark the tenth anniversary of *Art and Agency*’s publication, these extreme responses were foremost in our mind. We were not motivated merely by a desire to celebrate the book or its author. Rather, we both felt the need to address a shared, nagging discomfort: that ten years after its emergence, during which time it had been read by students and academics across a range of disciplines and traditions, *Art and Agency* was beginning to lose the controversial edge that had brought it to prominence. Indeed, there was and remains a sense in which it had never really fulfilled its potential, in part because the conversation around the book had never gone far enough: people either loved it or hated it, but there was little discussion between the two poles.

In some ways, Gell’s theory has been the victim of its own success. As doctoral students in Cambridge in the 2000s, we found it hard to escape the sense of excitement that surrounded *Art and Agency*, and functioned almost as a protective aura. The book had a certain ‘technical virtuosity’ (Gell 1992: 52) about it; it seemed fiendishly difficult and captivatingly clever, and therein lay its allure. Yet as we began teaching undergraduate and graduate courses on artefacts, materiality, art and museums – all topics on which Gell had something to say – we also began to see this captivation as a stumbling block. Although our students had all picked up *Art and Agency*, few engaged with it beyond the first three chapters. Perhaps this was because the book’s reputation was beginning to precede it. Everyone knew, and repeated, the maxim that Gell’s theory was all about how objects could be person-like in exercising social agency. While

a useful and perfectly valid summary of the book, it nonetheless revealed only a fraction of the complex story which anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians and others are still unravelling today. Our decision to hold the symposium was thus partly to redirect attention to the rest of that story – to work out how much more there was, and might be, to this iconic theory.

The other impetus came from the surprising fact that there had been frustratingly few attempts to draw scholars together to take stock of the myriad responses to Gell's theory: up to the present, the corpus of literature on *Art and Agency* remains dispersed, distributed and inchoate. An anthropological conference held in Canberra the year it was published marked a first step in exploring its potential; its contributions were subsequently collected in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Pinney and Thomas 2001). Outside of Gell's native anthropology, a panel at the 2000 Theoretical Archaeology Group meeting, which subsequently grew into a 2003 conference and later the volume *Art's Agency and Art History* (2007), has eloquently plotted the implications of Gell's theory for art historians.

As richly illustrated, theoretically innovative collections, these two volumes offer much to mull over. However, they both remain constrained by disciplinary boundaries and concerns, with each volume consisting largely of scholars within the same academic domains speaking to each other. By 2008, to our knowledge, there had never been a consciously interdisciplinary forum engaging with Gell's work. Considering the evident eclecticism of Gell's approach, as well as the cross-disciplinary reach of his book, this seemed to us a rather odd, and unfortunate, omission. One of our key aims in this respect was to translate the bold disregard for disciplinary borders so characteristic of *Art and Agency* into a real, live symposium; to give practitioners from different fields the chance to discuss a theory and subject of common interest. What, we wondered, could other disciplinary perspectives bring to a discussion of the impact and value of Gell's anthropological theory over the previous ten years? Would such a discussion offer further directions in which his theory could be developed? And most importantly, how might all these developments and reflections broaden our understandings of art, objecthood, personhood and other (sometimes unexpected) topics?

The papers assembled in this volume are intended to offer some answers to these questions. Like the theory which motivated it, we see this book as 'unfinished business' (Gell 1998: 80): a springboard to further engagement with art, objecthood, cognition, personhood and sociality. In keeping with Gell's characteristic, and controversial, magpie-like selectiveness, the contributions range across diverse ethnographic, archaeological, literary and art historical contexts: from disco in Papua New Guinea to the tomb of the First Emperor of China; from Renaissance

texts to twentieth-century jazz. Like the objects in an artist's *oeuvre*, this book may thus be seen as a 'nodal point' (*ibid.*: 225) of critique, exchange and innovation involving a group of leading scholars in the arts and social sciences. Before delving into their chapters, however, we would like to engage in a bit of context-filling – first, by summarizing the theory around which they all revolve, and second, by surveying the extensive field of responses to it, to which their voices have now been added.

Art and Agency: A Summary

The manner in which *Art and Agency* was produced has arguably become part of its mythology and efficacy. Gell wrote the bulk of the book in the last months of his life, and it was prepared for publication by some of his closest friends and colleagues. The final product has consequently seemed to many readers like an impermeable entity come down from the mountain: we can engage with the book itself, but not with the author in person. We cannot ask for clarification or enter into debate in a seminar,¹ and he cannot revise or defend his arguments. We can, however, attempt to highlight some of its recurrent themes and ideas, many of which are taken up by the contributors to this volume.

As Chris Gosden observed at the 2008 symposium, it was evident from the day's discussions that everyone had read a slightly different version of *Art and Agency*. This is our version of it, or rather, an amalgam of our individual versions – indices both of our own engagements with the book, and with people and objects in Cambridge and our field-sites. Nothing so clearly illustrates Gell's emphasis on the agency of the viewer, or in this case the reader, in actively creating an artefact. Moreover, as Georgina Born suggests in this volume, this multiplicity extends to the author himself – more so because of the intrinsic connection between his biography and his book: 'It seems that we all have our own Alfred Gell'.

The symposium participants were not the only ones to observe that *Art and Agency* is in many ways a book of two halves (Arnaut 2001: 192; Davis 2007: 202), the first consisting mainly of objects and agency, and the second, more neglected by subsequent scholars, a melange of cognition, psychology, creativity, temporality and personhood. At first glance, the earlier chapters seem removed from the cognitive twists and turns of the later ones, which cover everything from transformations in 'style' to 'distributed personhood'. Yet, we suggest that amid the complex, sometimes infuriating, maze that is *Art and Agency*, there is a discernible logic – a consistent interest, rather than a watertight theory, in working out just how mind, matter and personhood relate to each other. The following summary attempts to trace some of this logic as it progresses.

Art and Agency opens as a gauntlet which Gell throws down to the anthropological and art historical establishment. Elaborating on the arguments in his 1992 essay, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, Gell criticizes prevailing approaches to the anthropology of art for ‘reify[ing] the “aesthetic response” independently of the social context of its manifestations’ (Gell 1998: 4). For him, a properly anthropological theory should revolve around ‘social relationships, and not anything else’ (*ibid.*: 5). Consequently, he argues, what analysts need to understand is not what art objects represent or symbolize, but what they *do* within their social worlds – that is, their ‘practical mediatory role . . . in the social process’ (*ibid.*: 6). An Asmat shield, for example, may be of aesthetic interest to a scholar or Western museum visitor, but to the opposing warrior for whom it was designed to be seen, it was surely ‘fear-inducing’ (*ibid.*). From this perspective, ‘the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded’ (*ibid.*: 7): the shield is effective not because of its aesthetic beauty, but because of what it causes to happen. In this capacity, then, it is a ‘social agent’: a person or a thing ‘seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events’ (*ibid.*: 16).

This is where Gell begins to rattle the cage. This definition of agency applies equally to persons and things; indeed, he ventures, if art objects can be defined by their status as social agents, then ‘anything whatsoever could, conceivably, be an art object from the anthropological point of view, including living persons’ (Gell 1998: 7). Persons can be things and things can be persons, because the focus here is not on essences (what entities ‘are’) but on agency – what they ‘do in relation’ to each other. In one fell swoop, Gell thus overturns a foundational distinction on which most anthropologies and studies of art have been based. Suddenly, questions of authorship, creativity, control and indeed sociality are thrown wide open. Can material entities be more than mere canvasses on which humans exert their will? Wherein lies the power, the effect, of art? Where, for that matter, are relations crafted and reshaped?

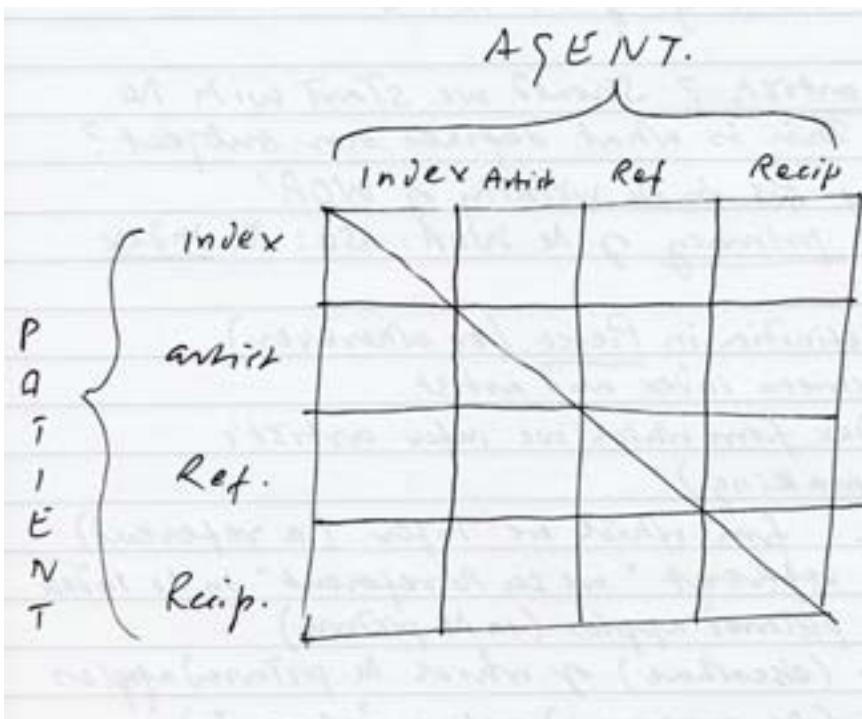
In Chapters 2 and 3, Gell expounds on ideas of ‘*agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation*’ (*ibid.*: 6, *italics in original*) within an analytical framework which he calls ‘the art nexus’. In it, he outlines four key players. Chief among these is the ‘index’ – usually a made artefact such as an art object – which enables its observer, or ‘recipient’, to ‘make a *causal inference*’ (*ibid.*: 13, *italics in original*) regarding the capabilities or intentions of its originator, usually the ‘artist’. Taking his cue from the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, Gell calls this ‘particular cognitive operation’ ‘the abduction of agency’ (*ibid.*: 13). The picture is complicated with the addition of the ‘prototype’, that is, ‘the entity which



0.1 Alfred Gell, n.d. Worshippers before an Idol. Courtesy of Simeran Gell.

the index represents visually (as an icon, depiction, etc.) or non-visually' (ibid.: 26). These four entities are all relational slots within the art nexus that can potentially be filled by anything or anyone. Each acts as an agent or a patient (that is, the recipient of a person or thing's agency) vis-à-vis the others, sometimes doing so simultaneously or at different points in time (ibid.: 30).

There are numerous configurations in which the index, artist, recipient and prototype might occur, but one of Gell's own examples will suffice. Early in the book, he refers to Francisco de Goya's famous portrait of the Duke of Wellington (1812–1814), shown clad in full military attire, adorned with military crosses and medals. Analysed within the art nexus, the painting may be viewed by its 'recipients' as an 'index' of the Duke of Wellington's greatness as produced by the artist, Goya. Yet Goya was not the sole agent in this relationship. If he had depicted the Duke as 'a little girl with golden curls . . . he would have been regarded as insane and the Duke would have been understandably displeased' (ibid.: 35). Instead, 'he had to produce a portrait depicting the features actually possessed by the Duke and regarded as characteristic of his persona, his Roman nose,



0.2 Alfred Gell, n.d. Preliminary sketch of the 'art nexus'. Courtesy of Simeran Gell.

serious demeanour, military attire, etc.' (ibid.: 35). In this sense, the artist's strokes were 'dictated' not only by the agency of his patron, the Duke, but also by a 'prototype' – an ideal image on which expectations are based – of a great military hero.

While this case is unambiguously art-like, Gell uses numerous examples to demonstrate how his theory can potentially be applied to any material thing – cars, landmines, religious idols – embedded in a network of social relations. In this respect, his anthropology of art is 'just anthropology itself, except that it deals with those situations in which there is an "index of agency" which is normally some kind of artefact' (Gell 1998: 66). Woven into this anthropological definition of agency, however, are also the "folk" notions of agency' (ibid.: 17) invoked and deployed by the people with whom anthropologists work. As socio-cultural interpretations of agentive interactions, such models overlap but are not always congruent with those of anthropologists. In this respect, Gell's interest is also in how people attribute agency to things: a process which itself shapes their capacity to be social agents. An elaborately carved and painted Trobriand

canoe prow board, for example, may be defined by the anthropologist as a social agent because of its mediatory role in trade – and more specifically, because it causes Trobrianders’ trading partners to ‘disgorg[e] their best valuables without demur’ upon viewing it (*ibid.*: 71). Yet its ability to do so rests on the socio-cultural context in which such exchanges occur, for its viewers are likely to see in its ‘virtuosity’ evidence of its users’ ‘superior magic’, to which they must submit (*ibid.*: 71; see also Gell 1992). Here, Trobriand magic is the ‘folk’ model of agency on which Gell’s anthropological analysis is built.

The first chapters of *Art and Agency* thus feature a constant interplay between two distinct levels and types of ‘agency’ – one anthropological, one ‘folk’ – with Gell showing how the former should revolve around, and indeed derive from, the latter. So far, so familiar. In the second part of the book, however, Gell begins to pay more attention to a third kind of agency: one which, unlike the previous two, is fundamentally ontological rather than epistemological. Once again, the linchpin of this project is the index. Most scholars have picked up on the notion that the Gellian index functions chiefly as a sign that points to something else. In this vein, *Art and Agency* has been described by Daniel Miller as a theory of ‘inferred intentionality’, whereby the author looks ‘through objects to the embedded human agency we infer that they contain’ (Miller 2005: 13). This much is true. But what has often been glossed over, or perhaps overlooked, is another vital aspect of the index: the fact that, in a properly Peircian sense, it bears a direct causal relationship to its origin. It is, as Gell puts it, ‘*the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency*’ (1998: 15; italics in original).

Put differently, Gell’s index is not a mere representation of its object – say, a god or a set of social relations – but is fundamentally (part of) the thing itself, just as ‘[a]n ambassador is a spatio-temporally detached fragment of his nation’ (Gell 1998: 98). A West African *nkisi* figure, studded with nails, is thus described as ‘the visible knot which ties together an invisible skein of relations, fanning out in social space and social time’ (*ibid.*: 62), and the made artefact more generally as ‘a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form’ (*ibid.*: 68). This is a vital point in Gell’s theory, which provides a link between the different sections of the book. More than looking backwards through an index to its originator, we can also use it to move *forward*, to create, improvise and expand. The index is not some dead-end, but a generative agent in itself which can spawn new and modified forms as a locus of social creativity. As agents, persons and things are thus inescapably temporal, ‘occupy[ing] a certain biographical space, over which culture is picked up, transformed, and passed on, through a series of life-stages’ (*ibid.*: 11).

Gell expands on this theme from Chapter 6 (Gell 1998; see also Gell, this volume), where he begins to examine the mechanisms through which

transmission, change and creativity take place. Here, he shifts his focus from an ‘externalist’ theory of agency – one that deals with intersubjective relations (*ibid.*: 127) – towards an ‘internalist’ theory of perception, cognition and psychology. For him, neither approach alone is sufficient for an anthropology of art; the key is rather in recognizing that ‘cognition and sociality are one’ (*ibid.*: 75) and must hence be explored simultaneously. His initial examples centre on decorative art, and it is here that he obliquely slides aesthetics back into the frame in the form of ‘decoration’. His aim, however, is not to reify aesthetics as an asocial topic, but to study it in relation to the ‘psychological functionality of artefacts, which cannot be disassociated from the other types of functionality they possess, notably their practical, or social functions’ (*ibid.*: 74).

Central to this undertaking is a detailed examination of how decorative patterns act visually and cognitively on humans, often with social implications. Drawing on psychological research and a range of case studies including Tamil threshold designs, Cretan mazes and Marquesan tattoos, Gell places the index – on or in which such patterns might be found – at the crux of his exploration. An index may be a social slot (Gell 1998: 7), but we must also attend to each individual index’s visual and corporeal features, which are the source of its efficacy. How, he asks, do complex patterns act on the human eye? What is the link between visual perception and cognition? How might a person, or indeed a demon, become trapped – mentally, socially and physically – by a pattern?

It is here, we suggest, that a third mode of agency is most fully explored as the actual ‘thing-ly’ (Gell 1998: 20) capacity of artefacts *qua* artefacts to make things happen. The most sustained examination of this idea takes place in Chapter 8, which some critics have viewed as an anomaly due to its concerted, almost overly technical, focus on style (e.g. Arnaut 2001: 192, n.1). In these pages, we are taken through seemingly endless explorations of ‘relations between relations’ (1998: 215), as Gell shows how one Marquesan motif can transform into another and yet another through a series of modifications. Yet, this discussion makes more sense if viewed in the context of the author’s developing meta-interest in the relationship between visuality, cognition and social action. For Gell, the study of art and material forms in general is inevitably the study of the ‘enchainment’ (*ibid.*: 141) between mind, body, sociality and world. Crucially, agency is distributed across this chain: it is not the preserve of humans’ actions and relations, because they too are acted on by patterns and other art-like features of the index. Innovation and creation, as Chapter 8 shows, are constantly taking place ‘in and through’ the visual and the material, not just in human minds.

This brings us back to the relationship between persons and things. As we later explain, Gell has sometimes been taken to task for refusing to

transcend the distinction between them, and for apparently subordinating the ‘secondary agency’ of things to the ‘primary agency’ of persons (Gell 1998: 20–21). Yet, by the end of the book, it has become impossible to take even commonsense Western conceptions of ‘persons’ and ‘things’ for granted. While retaining the words, Gell is busy reconfiguring the concepts by asking crucial ontological questions about the nature, location and temporality of agency. This is illustrated, for example, in his depiction of the creative agency of the artist.² The *oeuvre* of a painter, he points out, is innately temporal: each finished work usually builds on a series of preparatory studies, and in turn becomes a study for later works. Works of art taken together thus ‘form a macro-object, or temporal object, which evolves over time’ (*ibid.*: 233).

The evolution of thought, that creative transformative process which creates the macro-object, does not merely take place in the artist’s consciousness. Rather, Gell argues, “‘thinking’ takes place outside us as well as inside us” (*ibid.*: 236). The artist’s creativity lies at the conjunction of mind and canvas – or rather, they act as one within a single temporal process. Like the poet who ‘writes down his lines, and then scratches them out’, the artist’s ability to create and innovate relies ‘on the existence of physical traces of his previous (mental) activity’ (*ibid.*: 236). While, terminologically, Gell continues to privilege ‘cognition’ and ‘personhood’ as the key foci of his approach, conceptually he actually reaches a point not dissimilar to that of Tim Ingold (2000) or Bruno Latour (1993, 2005), both of whom highlight the ontological symmetry (Latour 1993) of humans and non-humans in the production of sociality (and indeed life in general).³ The artefacts created by Gell’s artist are irreducibly person-things – nodes in a form of cognition that, far from being purely mental or internal, is ‘diffused in space and time, and . . . carried on through the medium of physical indexes and transactions involving them’ (*ibid.*: 232).

Gell articulates this proposition through a theory of ‘distributed personhood’, in which he proposes to treat persons ‘not as bounded biological organisms, but . . . all the objects and/or events in the milieu from which agency or personhood can be abducted’ (Gell 1998: 222). In this way,

[a] person and a person’s mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate, testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself long after biological death. (*ibid.*: 222)

By this stage, *Art and Agency* has become a theory of creativity and (re)generation. While the book thus closes on the same note on which it

opened – social relations – it does not revert to a stultified notion of ‘the social’ that is distinct from ‘the material’. Instead, the very idea of the social has now been enlarged and reshaped, such that it is simultaneously cognitive, material and temporal. Gell has outlined not only a new approach to the anthropology of art, but to anthropology itself.

Responses to *Art and Agency*: A State-of-the-Field Survey

The themes and ideas outlined above will be played out, debated and expanded throughout this book. Before examining the individual chapters, however, it is worth pausing to survey the sizeable field of responses to *Art and Agency*. Doing so situates the present volume within its broader scholarly context, while also lending shape to its arguments, many of which have been forged in dialogue with or as departures from the existing literature.

On the whole, there have been three overlapping modes of engagement with *Art and Agency*. First are the robust critiques, or at least critical analyses (e.g. Bowden 2004; Layton 2003; Morphy 2009), of theoretical and ethnographic facets of Gell’s theory. Then there are several tentative but expansive efforts to adapt its analytical framework and methodology to whole academic disciplines or fields of study, such as art history (e.g. Osborne and Tanner 2007; Pinney and Thomas 2001; Rampley 2005). Finally, forming the largest category, are numerous applications of (aspects of) the theory to a staggering range of historical and cultural settings. These include case studies of cross-cultural art transactions (Graburn and Glass 2004; Harrison 2006; Lipset 2005), photography (Chua 2009; Hoskins 2006), music (Born 2005), art-science collaborations (Leach 2007), Malay martial arts (Farrer 2008), Renaissance European altarpieces (O’Malley 2005), Vietnamese sacred images (Kendall, Vũ and Nguyễn 2008, 2010) and Anglo-Saxon cremation rites (Williams 2004).

Cumulatively, these works constitute important forays that test the applicability and analytical usefulness of Gell’s theory across historical, geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Their concerns have largely clustered around three main themes, which in turn feed into broader scholarly debates: the question of art, the notion of material agency and the very nature of anthropology.

‘But is it art?’ The Art in *Art and Agency*

A common contention among both critics and admirers is that Gell’s book, ‘despite its title, is not primarily about art at all’ (Bowden 2004:

323). Despite opening with the question of art – or more specifically, the question of what an anthropology of art should entail – it nevertheless consistently ‘brackets out the question of art might be’ (Rampley 2005: 542). For Gell, this is a deliberate analytical move (1998: 7): one that enables him to discuss an eclectic jumble of examples, from Hindu idols to Melanesian kula valuables, without fear of contradiction or inconsistency. Indeed, it is only through such examples that one can discern what Gell sees as the important characteristics of art, such as technical virtuosity, visual and cognitive ‘stickiness’ and temporality.

This lingering ambiguity over the conceptual place of art has infuriated and inspired readers in equal measure. Ross Bowden, for example, complains that ultimately, ‘it is completely irrelevant whether the indexes he is discussing come under the heading of “art” or not’ (2004: 324), while Robert Layton insists that ‘what Gell has identified as the distinctive features of art cannot be understood except by recognizing the status of art as a culturally constructed medium of visual expression’ (2003: 461). Several scholars have taken Gell to task for dismissing aesthetics as a viable consideration in the anthropology of art, yet later building his argument around ‘what most people might refer to as the aesthetic and semantic dimensions of objects’ (Morphy 2009: 8; see also Layton 2003: 447; Bowden 2004: 320–22).⁴ For these and other critics, ‘art’ clearly does exist out there, often as a highly problematic category (Graburn and Glass 2004: 113), and Gell’s seemingly cavalier dismissal of what is widely taken to be its most crucial aspect must surely detract from the viability of his argument.

Had Gell lived to revise his theory, we wonder if he might have qualified his argument about art and aesthetics more thoroughly. As Matthew Rampley points out, Gell was not rejecting aesthetics *per se*, but aesthetics as a reified category which had been ‘artificially separate[d] . . . from the larger transactional nexus to which it belongs’ (2005: 542). Similarly, Jeremy Tanner and Robin Osborne note that ‘Gell’s strictures concerning aestheticism . . . have a very specific anthropological target, namely the contemporary program in anthropological aesthetics developed by Howard Morphy, Jeremy Coote, and Anthony Shelton’ (2007: 6; see also Thomas 2001: 4). Indeed, as Eric Hirsch shows in this volume, the study of meaning and aesthetics in an artefact or event’s ‘temporal presence’ is not necessarily incompatible with the approach laid out in *Art and Agency*. Instead of undermining his theory, then, Gell’s refusal to conform to the ‘aesthetics’ template arguably enriches it, by clearing the way for comparisons of things and events which, while not commonsensically art-like, nevertheless share important characteristics.

The indeterminacy and hence *analytical* elasticity of ‘art’ (Gell 1998: 7) is central to this project. As Janet Hoskins argues, Gell’s theory ‘about

the creation of art objects . . . could in fact be a theory about the creation of all forms of material culture' (2006: 75). In this reading, the contested notion of art may be Gell's springboard into the debate, but it is not the end-point of his theoretical explorations. Perhaps the art nexus is better thought of as what Rampley calls 'a meta-concept: [in which] some "art" transactions will be coded as aesthetic, some as magical and others as religious, and so forth' (2005: 542). Put differently, the advantage of Gell's framework is that it can potentially apply to anything involving the artefactual or performative mediation of social agency – a notion substantiated by the contributions to the present volume. In sum, while some scholars have criticized Gell for his definition – or lack thereof – of 'art', others have opted to run with it, using it as a theoretical and methodological tool through which to explore wider questions of agency, efficacy, cognition and creativity.

A 'Theory of Natural Anthropomorphism'? Persons, Things and Material Agency

If Gell's theory is not about 'art qua art' (Graburn and Glass 2004: 113), it has certainly been widely depicted as a theory about objecthood and materiality. *Art and Agency* was published at a time of revived social scientific interest in material things (e.g. Barringer and Flynn 1998; Brown 2001; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Haraway 1991; Hoskins 1998; Ingold 2000; Latour 1993; Myers 2001; Spyer 1998; Thomas 1991) – when scholars began shifting away from the 'panegyric of textuality and discursivity, to catch our theoretical sensitivities on the hard edges of the social world again' (Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe 2002: 1). Whether or not Gell saw himself as part of this wave, it is undeniable that his book became a prominent, almost metonymic, part of it.

Gell's treatment of materiality, however, has been more controversial than would initially appear. Over the years, he has been criticized for doing both too much and too little with objects. Howard Morphy, for example, has recently charged Gell with 'deflect[ing] attention away from human agency and attributing agency to the objects themselves' (2009: 5). He argues that Gell's 'agentive object . . . is a case of analogy gone too far', for what an object can actually do (not that much) is not the same as what some people 'think' an object can do (quite a lot; *ibid.*: 6). For him, people's relations to objects are inevitably contingent on 'their cultural background, their religious beliefs, their social status or gender and so on', such that '[m]eaning pre-exists action and indeed is one of the things that makes agency possible' (*ibid.*: 14). Yet in 'focusing at the level of social action with objects as agents', Gell obscures all these

factors, and hence ‘the role of human agency in artistic production’ and reception (*ibid.*: 6).

Interestingly, the opposite position has been taken by a number of recent works on materiality, which accuse Gell of falling back on a fundamentally social, person-based notion of agency. Daniel Miller, for example, depicts *Art and Agency* as ‘a theory of natural anthropomorphism, where our primary reference point is to people and their intentionality behind the world of artifacts’ (2005: 13), while the editors of *Thinking Through Things* argue that Gell’s depiction of objects as ‘secondary agents’ ‘stops short of revising our commonsense notions of “person” or “thing”’ (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007: 17; see also Leach 2007: 174). For these commentators, Gell’s failing is not that he occludes human agency, but that he does not go far enough in challenging its traditional primacy in social anthropology. Despite briefly exploring the ‘thingly causal properties’ of objects – to which he alludes in his example of Pol Pot’s soldiers and their landmines (Gell 1998: 20–21) – he ultimately fails to acknowledge the intrinsic agentive properties of artefacts.

Such contradictory readings of *Art and Agency* are as much responses to wider debates within artefact-oriented fields as they are to the theory itself. Until relatively recently, objects and materiality were of merely intermittent interest in many of the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Mauss 2000; Miller 1987; Strathern 1988). It was only from the 1990s that scholars began looking at things in themselves, rather than as symbols, language-like units or bearers of social meanings and values, ‘enliven[ed]’ only by ‘human transactions and calculation’ (Appadurai 1986: 5). Focusing on the different ways in which ‘the social is ordered, held, and “fixed” by the material’, academics began talking about ‘entangled networks of sociality/materiality’ (Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe 2002: 2), and not simply the relations between them.

This ‘material turn’ has engendered numerous intriguing, often divergent, theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of materiality. While some scholars treat the study of things as an ontological project, a means of exploring the mutual, symmetrical constitution of humans and non-humans (e.g. Ingold 2000; Knappett 2002, 2005; Latour 1993), others focus on people’s socially, culturally and religiously mediated experiences of them (e.g. Engelke 2007; Hoskins 1998; Keane 1997; Miller 2005; Morgan 2010; Spyre 1998). Still others use objects as methodological ‘hooks’ on which to explore anything from science to identity to emotional attachment (e.g. Brown 2001; Miller 2008; Daston 2000; Turkle 2007).

Gell’s theory could potentially both substantiate and challenge each of these approaches, depending on how it is construed and deployed.

While his distinction between ‘primary’ (intentional human) and ‘secondary’ (artefactual) agents appears to downplay the agency of objects, for example, his later chapters on creativity and distributed personhood (e.g. Gell 1998: 232–42) arguably demonstrate how the socio-cultural forms of things are shaped by their intrinsic properties. Rather than view these as contradictions, we suggest that they are better understood in terms of the three different layers of agency identified in this chapter: as overlapping but nonetheless distinct variants on the theme of causality, relationality and effect. In this capacity, *Art and Agency* does not only echo recent – and still contentious – debates about the relation between persons and things, but has played a significant part in precipitating and complicating them.

The State of the Art of Anthropology

Gell’s immediate contribution to the field of artefact-oriented studies was to provide a theory which, in its simplified form, compellingly articulated what was becoming a widespread argument – that objects had ‘agency’. Consequently, its reputation has fostered the assumption among many ‘mainstream’ social anthropologists that it has very little to do with the world beyond art, objecthood and materiality. However, *Art and Agency* also provokes serious questions about the very nature and scope of social anthropology – many of them equally germane to art history, archaeology and other disciplines. Key among these is a familiar dilemma: what is the relationship between the general and the particular? Are universalizing theories actually helpful in the study of particular case studies? How can singular phenomena be made to do comparative work? Are different socio-cultural units ultimately incommensurate?

In some ways, Gell strikes us as a fundamentally old-fashioned anthropologist, not so much because he saw social anthropology as being about the social, but because he was asking some seriously ‘big’ questions about human nature and society through comparison, extrapolation and analogy – questions which many contemporary anthropologists studiously eschew.⁵ Never satisfied to simply linger on the minutiae of particular art objects or case studies, he constantly drew them into a comparative, potentially universal, analytical framework: the ‘art nexus’. Accordingly, he drew inspiration not only from social anthropology, but also psychology, biology, linguistics, philosophy and art history. In order to understand the social, he seemed to be saying, anthropologists had to understand the whole ‘panoply’ (Gell 1998: 126) of mind, body, matter, space and time that constitute it. The persons that populate *Art and Agency* are thus not social beings in a narrow sense, as some critics charge,

but what Carl Knappett, following Mauss (1936), calls ‘l’homme total’: irreducible combinations of ‘biological organism, psychological agent, and social person’ (Knappett 2005: 15).

In this respect, there was something of a nineteenth-century ethnologist about Gell. In scope and method, at least, he was more like James Frazer or E.B. Tylor than, as Layton (2003: 448) and Morphy (2009: 22) imply, like Radcliffe-Brown.⁶ In common with the first two, he had a resolutely comparative streak, pulling disparate theoretical and thematic fragments into his book; eclecticism itself was his method (see also Thomas, this volume). Unsurprisingly, this approach, redolent as it is of an earlier anthropological era, has ruffled a few feathers. Even before postmodernism thrust the discipline into a ‘vortex of epistemological anxieties’ (Metcalf 2002: 11), anthropologists were already shying away from large-scale theorizing, from devising unifying theories to account for multitudinous phenomena. While comparison remains acceptable, universalist pronouncements are now panned as reductive, ethnocentric, dehumanizing, overly vague and overly specific: in short, hopelessly flawed. In trying to formulate a single anthropological theory with precisely that sort of universal reach, as applicable to ritual sculptures as it was to modern art, Gell was straying into extremely awkward territory.

This has, of course, had repercussions. Gell’s selective incorporation of insights from non-anthropological disciplines has sometimes been depicted as flippant cherry-picking. Bowden, for example, has reproached him for relying on ‘an *anthropologically uninformed* essay by the philosopher Wollheim’ (2004: 315; italics added) in his discussion on style, implying that this in itself detracts from his argument. Correspondingly, Gell’s willingness to put Hindu idols, Marquesan tattoos and Marcel Duchamp’s artworks next to each other as homologues (Gell 1992) has understandably been construed as showing an audacious disregard for that holy grail of anthropology and its cognate disciplines – context (Strathern 1995: 160). Both Layton and Morphy, for instance, point out that his strategy of ‘imagining oneself in the position of a member of another culture’ (Layton 2003: 457) and hence claiming to know what they think when considering an art object, ‘brackets off – almost provides shutters to . . . the context of viewing’ (Morphy 2009: 7). The implication, for contemporary readers at least, is clear: that an anthropology of art, and indeed any sort of anthropology, must be premised on ‘how the objects [or other phenomena] are understood in the way they are and how that relates to the ways in which they are used in context and in turn how that contributes to ongoing socio-cultural processes’ (Morphy 2009: 9). In other words, any anthropology that has the temerity to posit a mental unity to all of humanity, irrespective of context, is highly suspicious.

Such responses arguably reflect a widespread, deeply ingrained instinct to protect the particular – those thematic and theoretical ‘small places’ (Eriksen 1995) that are academic specialists’ own backyards – against the dangers inherent in generalization. While legitimate, these criticisms highlight the tensions between different modes of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences today. The questions they raise are fundamentally methodological: is there a place today for ‘grand’ theories, or at least theories that can transcend the particularities of context? Are ‘big’ thought experiments of equal scholarly merit to thickly described case studies and analyses? Is there a danger, conversely, of descending into a paralysing ‘hyper-particularism’ (Keane 2008: S115) that eschews any sort of comparison?

On these points, it is equally instructive to look at those responses to *Art and Agency* which seek to extend its analytical and conceptual possibilities to larger disciplinary (sub)fields. While Gell’s indifference to contextual histories, politics, transformations, contradictions and ‘messes of real life’ (Chua 2009: 48), and his tendency to operate ‘ethnographically within closed contexts’ (Arnaud 2001: 206) has been widely commented upon (e.g. Graburn and Glass 2004: 113; Lipset 2005: 111; Morphy 2009: 17; Thomas 2001: 9), a number of writers have actually seen this as a strength of his theory. Rampley, for example, points out that it is precisely *Art and Agency*’s focus on ‘micro-social interactions’ that enables it to ‘illuminate various issues in art practice and theory in Western societies’ (2005: 543) which might otherwise be obscured by a focus on art as a social institution. Similarly, Tanner and Osborne reflect that Gell’s ‘formulae and diagrams offer what is potentially an extremely valuable tool for historical and comparative analysis’ in ‘allow[ing] one to focus on fundamental underlying relational structures’ (2007: 21) – even if, they hazard, he eventually found that formal diagrammatic analysis could not capture the shifting, unfolding nature of agency (*ibid.*: 22). In a different vein, Hoskins argues that Gell’s work is a useful means of studying ‘cross-cultural visuality’ – the ‘efficacy of an object’s appearance’ in potentially any context (2006: 76). Nicholas Thomas pushes this further by suggesting that even if *Art and Agency* is ‘largely unconcerned with the political manipulation of art in a more concrete sense’ (2001: 9), it is also plausible that ‘[t]he political may be enriched by an anthropology “beyond aesthetics”’ (2001: 11).

For these writers, *Art and Agency* stands less as a behemoth to be taken down a peg than as a catalyst to further exploration, innovation and, most intriguingly, cross-disciplinary engagement. It is this invitation which we, and the contributors to this interdisciplinary volume, have endeavoured to take up.

Protentions and Retentions

This volume is intended to be both forward-looking and retrospective. Throughout the chapters, contributors offer personal reflections on their own reception of the book, of the agency they abducted from it, and its effect on their own work and thinking. Reference is frequently made too to the interaction of the multiple elements of Gell's *oeuvre*: to the distributed object that is *Art and Agency*, to his own publications and drawings, to artworks upon which he drew, and to the responses of his readers in the years since his death. Such temporal and spatial connections were taken up by Gell himself in a paper – written in the 1980s and published here for the first time – that prefigures his later arguments. Consequently, while familiar questions of 'art', material agency and the comparative method crop up frequently in the following chapters, they are joined by new reflections on relatively under-explored themes in *Art and Agency*, such as style, creativity, temporality and cognition.

Susanne Küchler's opening contribution offers a series of insights not only on *Art and Agency*'s impact over the last decade, but also on its status as 'pivotal to an anthropology that is bracing itself for the twenty-first century'. Like the other contributors, she follows Gell's lead in crossing boundaries – most obviously and dramatically that between the social world and cognitive and material realms, a gradual engagement which has been prompted by exposure to developments in mathematics, computing technology and neuroscience. Taking as her examples artefacts such as the skeuomorph and the New Ireland *malanggan*, which themselves play across material and cognitive boundaries, she identifies in *Art and Agency* a hidden logic of 'material translation', of affinity and transmission, which brings together body, mind and world. While reviving the 'big questions and big answers' characteristic of an earlier tradition of classical ethnology, Gell's theory also 'signals the onset of an intellectual epoch' characterized by a 'renewed sensitivity' towards the nature of the interaction between 'thought and thing'.

The idea of drawing on the past to move forward is also proposed by Chris Gosden. Gosden suggests that a renewed emphasis on 'material things and the realisation that things can help shape people' can help to rehabilitate the historically dominant but theoretically impoverished typological approach within archaeology, and lend 'this huge descriptive enterprise new point and purpose'. His application of Gell's theory to the metalwork of Bronze Age Britain explores the relationship between technological and social change in a disciplinary context where a material-centred methodology is essential. In his chapter, Gosden embellishes and advances Gell's theories of the interaction between the human mind and non-human artefacts, reconciling his emphasis on technologies of

enchantment or wonder with Richard Seaford's study of the emergence of money in classical Greek society. Both approaches, he argues, suggest that 'artefacts *en masse* are part of our joint intelligence, helping make sense of the world and the people in it in particular ways'.

For Jeremy Tanner, artefacts do not simply help humans to make sense of the world, but also enable them to act on it – both in this life and the next. His chapter focuses on two monumental royal tombs from the ancient past: the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the sprawling underground palace of the First Emperor of China. He suggests that Gell's art nexus offers a useful means of transcending the dichotomous approaches to comparison hitherto prevalent in the field of comparative art: attempts to define cross-cultural aesthetics on the one hand, and an over-objective, socio-archaeological tracing of transformations in style and monumentality on the other. Tanner's solution is to draw a comparison through the study of 'art's specific agency' as it is manifested through the 'specific material properties of images and their affordances'. By tracing the different forms and directions of agency exerted by the naturalistic, cut-marble sculptures adorning the outside of the Mausoleum and the rows of terracotta warriors filling the interior of Qin Shihuangdi's tomb, he also reveals how each ruler hoped to project his agentive personhood into the future, beyond his biological death. In this sense, the tombs were inherently temporal artefacts, reaching simultaneously backwards and forwards in both biographical and real time.

Temporality and change are dealt with more explicitly in Gell's own study of the *oeuvre* of Marcel Duchamp, and in the contributions by Simon Dell and Georgina Born. Written by Gell in 1985, 'The Network of Standard Stoppages' approaches Duchamp through contemporaneous philosophical works by William James, Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl, in an effort to tackle the representation of duration and the problem of continuity in the visual arts. Commenting on the piece from an art historical perspective, Dell notes that Gell's engagement with Duchamp can be seen as generative both of a particular version of Duchamp and his *oeuvre*, but also of a particular version of Gell – or more specifically, of Gell's articulation of the 'extended mind' in *Art and Agency* over ten years later.

The relationship between Gell's two studies is also examined by Born, who sets out to resolve four conceptual problems with *Art and Agency*'s theoretical formulation: those relating to scale, time, social mediation and ontology. Curiously, she argues, solutions to some of them appear to be offered in 'The Network of Standard Stoppages'. Taking her cue from this earlier piece as well as her own explorations of Bergson and Husserl, Born investigates the significance of 'multiple temporalities' in the 'analysis of cultural production'. Framing her project is a forceful critique of

the limitations of Gell's approach – in particular his 'Durkheimian leanings', his 'resilient, if ambivalent humanism' that stops short of engaging with the 'thing-ly' properties of objects and the socio-cultural ontologies in which they are produced. Looking at the 'relay of social and material mediation' in three distinctive musical ontologies from the nineteenth century to the present, her chapter 'expand[s] considerably on the account of art's social mediation proffered by Gell'.

Translating Gell's approach into a new arena is similarly productive for Warren Boutcher, who contributes a richly evocative analysis of the agency of the book, writing and literature. Taking us into a realm where materiality and the visual have often appeared to play different roles, Boutcher sidesteps Gell's apparent refusal to discuss literary theory, and explores literature as a technology that magically extends the operations of human faculties such as memory, and books and other literary artefacts as indexes of social relations. His argument that 'the magic of letters, handwriting and the manuscript or printed codex' which characterize medieval attitudes to the book have their echo in recent and even contemporary readers' engagement with the printed word, suggests how the interaction between artwork and recipient must be considered across great distances, both spatially and temporally.

Eric Hirsch extends the thread of comparison that has run throughout this volume by pulling together anthropological studies of Australian Aboriginal ritual painting and contemporary ritual performances in Papua New Guinea, and art historical studies of Western painting in an investigation of how 'artworks' of different kinds can be understood as having their own 'temporal presence' in addition to existing, as Gell argues, *in time*. Drawing on Gell's exploration of the extended mind and on Roy Wagner's notion of 'epoch' – that time which stands for itself, or is always 'now' – Hirsch argues that artworks are fundamentally performances that exist within, but also generate, their own time. His emphasis on time's presence reaffirms the importance of aesthetics and meaning in a manner which complements Gell's stress on art as a performance and field of action.

Just as *Art and Agency* cuts controversially back and forth across space and time, each contributor to this volume reaches across disciplinary, cultural, methodological and temporal boundaries. The 2008 Cambridge symposium concluded with a reception in the gallery of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) – a space in which artefacts from across the world are assembled together. Thinking and talking about Gell and his eclectic approach made a particular kind of sense amidst a collection which, for over a century, had been fuelled by the relentless acquisition, juxtaposition and comparison of artefacts from around the world and throughout human history by generations of archaeologists and anthropologists.

This is a point which is picked up by Nicholas Thomas in his epilogue to this volume. In it, he reflects on how museum collections constitute exceptionally fertile fields of research into the interactions between human and non-human agents. The galleries, but also the behind-the-scenes workrooms and stores in which artefacts come into contact with people and with each other can productively be seen as manifestations of the ‘nexus’ of social relations around an ‘art-object’ – even as distributed objects in the same way as the artist’s *oeuvre* or the Maori meeting house. Sometimes such synergies are more evident than others, but galleries such as those of the MAA or the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford exemplify the productivity of juxtapositions that can be surprising, even controversial (Herle et al. 2009). Is it time then, asks Thomas in conclusion, for those who work with and write about objects to ‘make the facts of their acting, the diversity of their characters, and the magic of their theatre visible – and questionable’?

* * *

If some of this introduction, and the book as a whole, reads like a celebration of a heroic figure in the recent history of anthropology, this is by no means our intention. Our aim has simply been to tackle head-on one of the most intriguing and controversial contributions to anthropology and its cognate disciplines in recent years, with the goal of fostering new debate, insights and innovations germane not only to the anthropology of art, but to the study of human life and sociality in general. Like one of Gell’s art objects, this volume is thus both a protention and a retention: a navigation through aspects of one person’s distributed *oeuvre* which extends it beyond its physical and temporal boundaries, to what we hope will be good, or at least thought-provoking, effect.

Notes

1. The arena which Gell highlighted as so fundamental to academic theory and practice (1999: 1–9), despite the apparent exclusion of the performative from his framework in *Art and Agency*, in favour of the visual (1998: 1).
2. Gell’s example is Marcel Duchamp, whose *oeuvre* he had begun to explore in a 1985 article, published for the first time in this volume. The influence of Duchamp’s work on Gell’s thinking, in return, is charted by Simon Dell in his commentary.
3. See Küchler, this volume, for an insightful comparison of Gell and Latour.
4. As Webb Keane (personal communication) has pointed out, however, what Gell really dismisses is hermeneutics as an analytical approach.
5. For other exercises in the rehabilitation of the comparative method, see: Strathern 1992; Bloch 2005; Herle, Elliott and Empson 2009. Also see Küchler, this volume.

6. Indeed, Frances Larson (2007) has recently written an illuminating article juxtaposing Gell's comparative method against that of Henry Balfour, first curator of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum (1890–1939).

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