

What Philosophical Aesthetics Can Learn from Applied Anthropology¹

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Abstract: Through a detailed case study of investigations on beauty, I demonstrate that a thoughtful consideration of empirical evidence can lead to the disclosure of the fundamental assumptions entrenched in a philosophical discipline. I present a contrastive examination of two empirically oriented approaches to art and beauty, namely, the anthropology of art and the anthropology of aesthetics. To capture these two different ways of interpreting the available evidence, I draw upon a debate between Alfred Gell and Jeremy Coote on the understanding of beauty and art in the Dinka community. Following Gell, I reveal that the Western-centric predilection of Coote, who uses traditional aesthetic categories, leads to his failure to grasp the functional and causal roles of beauty in the social relations of the Dinka. In more general terms, my study reveals the inherent limitations of aesthetics as developed in the Western tradition and its Kantian legacy. Being steadily driven towards purely abstract and speculative concepts, such as ‘work of art,’ Western aesthetics has lost the ability to account for the causal role of beauty in social relations. By contrasting this approach with Gell’s anthropological approach to art, I indicate those fundamental assumptions of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline that apparently confine it to a particular cultural context, compromising its ability to account for the universal human condition. As my study illustrates, this limitation could be overcome by a thoughtful and unprejudiced examination of empirical evidence.

Keywords: anthropology of art, anthropology of aesthetics, Alfred Gell, Dinka.

1. A Thought Experiment vs. Empirical Evidence

I begin by briefly contrasting the philosophical character of aesthetics with the empirical orientation of anthropology as instantiated by the case, most eminent in the 1980s and 1990s, of Alfred Gell’s objections to the ‘theoretical’ approach to aesthetics that Arthur Danto propounded. The latter in 1988 prepared the catalog for a New York exhibition of African art (Danto 1988). There, he propounded the view that the status of a work of art depends on its interpretative context and symbolic meaning. For instance, if a hunting artifact from the Zande tribe, a “net,” had been exhibited in a New York museum, it could no longer be considered an element of the Zande’s setting. To substantiate his

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claim, Danto conceptually elaborated the contrast between the religious customs of two fictitious tribes: the Pot People and the Basket Folk. The former were assumed to worship the objects that the latter produced with the intention of ordinary usage. Gell argued that while this could be considered an interesting thought experiment, it failed to recognize actual tribal traditions. In particular, Danto was apparently ignorant of the importance of the hunting net in African customs. Consequently, Danto's sharp distinction between work of art and artifact – as Gell claimed – could not hold up against the ethnographic facts. (Gell 1996)

I am not going to explore this example any further, as it concerns a direct confrontation between the perspectives of philosophical aesthetics and social anthropology that is not highly relevant to the purpose at hand. Instead, let me focus on a more relevant case, the debate between Gell as an anthropologist of art and Jeremy Coote as an anthropologist of aesthetics. Below, I examine the debate in more detail, highlighting the key moments in the development of philosophy and anthropology, especially the anthropology of art, bringing out their Western-centric determinations and investigating how Gell's and Coote's interpretations of the empirical evidence project upon the human experience of the world and change its explanatory potential. I conclude by indicating how this debate reveals the fundamental assumptions of philosophical study, which limit its ability to form universal conclusions concerning the human condition.

The title of my paper may suggest that the narrative is primarily framed by the conceptual scheme of aesthetics. On the contrary, the ensuing argument, as well as the anthropological standpoints I examine, challenge the – characteristically Western-centric – primeness of aesthetics in other fields in art studies. Aesthetics stems from the Greek philosophy of beauty and art, and it continues to be framed by its Western heritage with the robust influence of philosophy, as evidenced by its Kantian legacy and the modern social “cult of art.” Although anthropology as a discipline likewise arose in the Western world, it nonetheless attempts to cultivate universalist ambitions and hence aims to establish its inquiries as possibly independent of the accomplishments of this extremely rationalized and technicized region. An explicit and systematic rejection of the Western legacy in art studies was articulated by the British social anthropologist Alfred Gell, who is commonly recognized as the author of the widely debated monograph, published posthumously, *Art and Agency*, and who introduced the anthropological theory of art. By consistently advancing anthropology as a branch of the social sciences, he paved the way for new perspectives on – and, consequently, a new theory of – the realm of activity traditionally referred to in the West as ‘artistic.’ This resulted in a revision of the significance of aesthetics and of the aesthetic. Expanding on Gell's perspective, I claim that the empirical evidence from anthropological investigations on beauty that embraces the existential dimension of the human person and establishes the epistemic primeness of individual and social agency and the production of

artworks over the aesthetic is a precondition of any, including any philosophical, study with universalist ambitions.

2. Anthropological Traditions in Consideration of the Aesthetic

It was the region of the Mediterranean Basin that gave rise to philosophical ideas about the world, the human person and her endeavors.² Eventually, as these ideas unfolded, the pertinent scope of philosophy and the disciplines that steadily emerged from it and their investigative methods were established. Kant's much later approach, despite its 'revolutionary' orientation, remained within the confines of this traditional scope, which framed its problems and epistemological categories. Consequently, Kant conceived of aesthetics, its ideas and basic presumptions, according to the same philosophical orientation.

Anthropology, which emerged in the early 20th century, is a much more recent discipline than aesthetics and was intentionally created as a separate field of research within the domain of social sciences, biological, and cultural inquiries. It subsequently advanced, often counter to its philosophical provenance, as has been pointedly emphasized, especially by Marcel Mauss in his essay on the concept of the person. (Mauss 1985) It is problematic, however, to deny that the ideas and methodologies formed in the Mediterranean region did not contribute to anthropology, not only the ancient and philosophically minded variety but also the one born in the "année sociologique," in the tradition of Durkheim or Mauss.

Of course, the European philosophical legacy, which includes concepts, terms, post-Aristotelian rigors of definition, classification and deduction, will likely continue to affect how the West-centric perception of the world is framed. Nevertheless, anthropologists seek to evade the imperialistic tendencies of the Western world in order to appreciate other regions and primarily to sustain the claim that fundamental knowledge concerning persons can be obtained beyond the West. The empirical base is intended to not be limited by a network of concepts and inferential links specific to a particular tradition but rather to explore the potential of diversity in order to reveal existential truths about *Homo sapiens sapiens* (Ingold 1996). Admittedly, anthropologists vary both in their respect for this basic assumption and the extent to which they succeed in implementing it.

Despite their awareness of the Western inclination, anthropologists are also more or less willing to acknowledge the impossibility of overcoming this limitation. With regard to their aesthetic investigations, this attitude is manifested in the minimalist approach of relying upon the basic meanings of

² A systematic exposition of the issues of anthropology and the anthropology of art, with a special emphasis on Alfred Gell's perspective, is presented in my monograph (Kawalec 2016).

concepts such as 'beauty,' 'aesthetic experience' or 'art.' Even the most recognized anthropological accomplishments in this respect reveal a thoroughgoing entanglement of anthropological tools with the Western aesthetic tradition. A pertinent illustration from the domain of the anthropology of art and aesthetics is Howard Morphy's "dualistic definition of art" (Morphy 1994), which accepts "the anthropological" approach as being on par with "the aesthetic" one. Morphy, like Gell, was a pupil of Anthony Forge. It was the latter who propounded the view that while Abelam artists consider the issues of form and proportion in their creations, the resulting efficiency of the tribal creator, interpreted by Western observers as beauty, is not achieved for the sake of beauty itself. The proper aim of the creator, as Forge argued, was to allow one to read in the work its relevant functional power.³ (Forge 1967, 82-83) This point was fully appreciated by Morphy only much later when he wrote that the Yolngu artists focus on an effect that Europeans would interpret as aesthetic but for them simply manifested the power of their ancestors.

3. Alfred Gell's Grounds for the Anthropology of Art and Aesthetics

Alfred Gell, a British social anthropologist who died prematurely in 1997 at the age of 51, was an original researcher in the field of the anthropology of art. Inspired by Forge, the author of *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual* (Gell 1975) undertook fieldwork in the Western district of the Sepik catchment in Papua New Guinea. Gell's dissertation was concerned with the *ida* ritual of the Umeda tribe in the Sepik region. He did not analyze this ritual within the broader sociological context or within the context of other studies of tribal beliefs. Instead, he mainly focused on aspects of the social impact of the transformation of the individual and the tribe. Among the ritual's multitude of meanings, he ultimately identified the existential aspect of the function of *ida*, which consisted of the taming of death by the tribe, which felt itself vulnerable to annihilation by the arduous environmental conditions. In his dissertation, Gell described the main function of the Umeda ritual in existential and ontological terms. Gell's style of discourse was unique among anthropologists, inasmuch as it was inspirational for those seeking answers to the fundamental questions. In this sense, Gell's approach is genuinely and thoroughly philosophical, though – like Mauss's – it receded from the philosophical territory of advanced inferences and sophisticated speculations.

The paradigmatic illustration of Gell's dismissal of philosophical inspiration is related to his central concept for the anthropology of art, namely, the concept of 'agency.' (Gell 1998a, 16-23) With regard to this concept, Gell explicitly relied on the folk meaning rather than the philosophical meaning. In his studies, he used concepts taken from everyday practices and forms of

³ Much later, Morphy also wrote that the Yolngu artists focus on an effect that Europeans would interpret as aesthetic but for them simply manifested the power of their ancestors.

discourse, which – as he was well aware – were not substantiated philosophically. Philosophers take for granted that the folk notions of agency, intention and mind require systematic explication and elaborated accounts. Gell, instead, embraced the part of the meaning of agency that philosophers failed to appreciate, for example, that pertaining to the agency inherent in sculptures or images of gods.

This novel approach to the concept of ‘agency’ (originally in the anthropological sense of idolatry) earned him recognition as the precursor of “the material turn.” (Gell 2013) Agency, according to Gell, can be attributed to human persons (*primary* agency) and to objects (*secondary* agency), including artworks, which in Gell’s account acquire the status of an *index*, on a par with (“non-artistic”) artifacts used in social interactions. The network of interactions between agent and recipient (patient), in its basic intentional dimension, was referred to by Gell as the ‘nexus.’ The nexus was the key concept of Gell’s understanding of the role of works of art (acknowledged as such in the Western world) but also of all the other artifacts and elements of reality that stimulated the creation of social relationships – even if merely intentional ones.⁴

This novel conceptualization of the elements of the social (including ‘aesthetic’) situation led largely to the development of the original anthropological theory of art as an empirically grounded endeavor. Of course, it was also an attempt to disengage with Western concepts and complex inferences. For Gell, the proper method of inference from an evidential basis was conditional on the assumption of the cause-effect relationship and proceeded accordingly by abduction. For him, only the causal assumption and abductive inference could ensure that investigation adhered to concrete, empirical detail and the realistic attitude. All deductions and highly abstract concepts Gell treated as doubtful and considered legitimate only when they were useful in understanding ethnographic or anthropological facts.

A consequence of this epistemological approach was the exclusion of the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘aesthetics’ from the set of terms used to render a direct description of the world. According to Gell, the most popular concepts in the Western world are merely conceptual and abstract constructs that are too far detached from the object of investigation. Moreover, they are tremendously ‘muddy,’ as further explained by Nick Zangwill (1986). The inaccuracy of the terms ‘aesthetics’ and ‘culture,’ and, above all, their highly abstract nature, are, according to Gell, a manifestation of a specifically Western idealistic way of

⁴ The category of ‘social objects’ – introduced in (Casetta and Torrenco 2014, 3-10) is different from Gell’s ‘social agents.’ According to the anthropologist, a ‘social agent’ is anything that creates or develops dynamics of nexus: relations between persons, including things and animals. These relations could be intentional – this feature is realistic, similar to the material or ‘social object.’

thinking.⁵ He recommended that they be used with caution and only when their meaning is precisely specified.

In Gell's view, aesthetics is primarily concerned with judgments of beauty. He rejected the idea of an autonomous function of art,⁶ mainly because such was not recognized among many non-Western communities. Gell explained the autonomy of art and aesthetic pleasure as emergent properties of the idealistically inclined – fictionalizing or highly abstractive – Western world. Anthropological discourse, instead, while driven by empirical evidence, should seek the common core of what constitutes universal human nature, what applies to every person living at any given time or in any given place on the Earth. Gell identified this core with human activity – in particular, the production of objects – that stimulated the emergence of various social interactions.

Therefore, in anthropology, Gell focused on beauty and its functions rather than 'art' and 'works of art.' Taking into account empirical evidence, especially from non-Western cultures, beauty could be treated as a property confined to so-called 'works of art,' namely, products created solely for the sake of beauty alone. The production of such objects or performances in the Western world had led to a treacherous social phenomenon that Gell in one of his articles labeled the 'Art Cult.' (Gell 1992) This cult, he claimed, had largely replaced the realm of religion, while beauty had replaced deity, or the value of holiness. According to the British anthropologist, since the world of values of the Western *Homo sapiens sapiens* had shrunk and flattened, anthropology, in particular the anthropology of art, had ample reason to seek to identify the 'core' of human activities outside of the Western world.

While empirical evidence for Gell concerns only social phenomena, it embraces their purely intentional dimension. 'Beautiful' shields or 'ugly' malangan figures and other tribal artifacts were not perceived by their authors as specific aesthetic objects. Conceived of rather in their causal and social role, these objects provided a whole range of data on the social and emotional phenomena stimulated by the artifact. While these data are rooted in the patterns of social life, the latter cannot be reduced to or distorted as pertaining merely to "aesthetic" feelings. The reason for taking the wealth of socio-emotional data as inherently related to the artifacts is so that their actual causal effectiveness can be captured. In contrast, 'aestheticizing theories' impose a Western reading of the activities and reactions of all ethnic 'others' (Gell 1998b) and thereby disregard the genuine causal explanatory potential of the data constituting the available evidence.

4. Agency – Art – Aesthetics. Gell's Debate with Coote

⁵ On the idealistic presumptions of anthropological research, see especially (Gell 1995).

⁶ Gell never ceased to apply the concept of 'art,' what caused many misunderstandings and drew much criticism from reviewers.

In 1993, during a session of the Oxford Association of Social Anthropologists attended by Gell, a paper was presented by Jeremy Coote, then the acting manager of the anthropological collections at Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford⁷ (Coote 1992). Gell later responded to this presentation in 1995. Although Coote announced a departure from the principles of old-style aesthetics, in fact, as argued by Gell, he still adhered to the well-known Kantian presumption that aesthetics constituted a part of gnoseology.⁸ Gell's own paper, *On Coote's "Marvels of everyday vision,"* (Gell 1995) discussed the principal issues related to art and aesthetic experience in order to systematize anthropological knowledge as independent from the influences of the Western world. Coote posed a problem – heavily exploited now in the anthropological literature – concerning the relationship between art, aesthetics and anthropology. The resolution of this problem by means of empirical evidence from the Dinka tribe may bring us closer to understanding what bearing anthropological empirical evidence has on a philosophical understanding of the human being.

The starting point of the article is Coote's thesis, stressed by citing Gombrich's motto that all people, everywhere, have an aesthetic foundation that is part of their culture. According to Coote, each participant in the community has a certain set of objects seen every day that are positively evaluated. While Coote therewith recognizes the incompatibility of Western conceptions of art with the anthropological perspective and the necessity of modifying it, he nevertheless fails to draw from this observation the correct conclusion regarding aesthetic experience. Coote – like Gell – advocated the reformulation of the anthropology of art by rejecting the aesthetic concept of art. However, he committed a mistake: he adopted the wrong assumption that the Nuer community he had investigated failed to develop art. By adopting such a starting point he was misled, Gell argued, to erroneous conclusions about the status of aesthetic experience.

For Coote, the characteristic feature of the Sudanese community is that it does not create any type of artwork. However, he would presumably reject the claim that this society lacks any aesthetic sensibility whatsoever, as he considered it a universal characteristic independent of a particular cultural context, though some communities produce many artworks while others have no museums or art galleries (such as the Nuer in Southern Sudan). Apparently, then, Coote acknowledges the disparity between aesthetics and the art world. However, Gell criticizes Coote for not taking the next step to producing a full-blooded anthropological theory of art and failing to recognize that the concepts of 'work of art' and 'aesthetics' both limit the description of empirical evidence, as they presume a Western outlook. To identify errors in Coote's way of thinking

⁷ A systematic exposition of Gell's standpoint is presented in Kawalec (2016, 178-185).

⁸ More precisely, as the subjective aspect of imagination about the object (Kant 2000).

and to more adequately describe the activities undertaken by the Sudanese Dinka community, Gell undertakes a more detailed examination of this case.

The Dinka form a small community in Southern Sudan that focuses on breeding cattle (steers). The cattle are usually of a uniform grayish color, but there are outstanding specimens. Such specimens are allocated to young men from the community. The young man takes care of it, leads it to pasture, feeds and waters it, cleans and decorates it with white ash rubbed on its head, and praises it with his own songs. The boy's involvement with the ox, observing it, admiring it and arranging songs, was thought by Coote to be a manifestation of aesthetic sensitivity to the beauty of natural objects. In this way, Coote sought to disrupt the traditional, received view of the aesthetic object as an artifact displayed in an art gallery.

Though for Coote aesthetics was not associated with art and creative activity, it was still interconnected with the perception of aesthetic quality. Communities have aesthetic predispositions, even without the presence of artworks, and each culture selects aesthetically distinctive visual features of the world; moreover, aesthetic sensibility precedes the production of artworks and their consumption.⁹ Coote claimed that non-Western aesthetics took artifacts as the starting point, artifacts that were most often recognized in the Western world as archaeological artworks or tribal originals. The inference concerning aesthetics (and community) occurred only subsequently on the basis of the reception of these items.

Gell appreciated Coote's revolt, even though assumptions derived from the Western aesthetics of Kant informed Coote's criticism of the old-style anthropology of art, which prioritized art-rich cultures with museums, galleries, and masterpieces over art-poor ones. He also conceded with Coote that the category of work of art was inadequate with respect to 'genuinely' artistic activities, even in the West and especially with respect to 'the artistic' daily activities, such as the maintenance of gardens or sculpting of magical figures. However, Gell contested the concept of 'aesthetics' used by Coote, which was based not on human abilities to act and produce artifacts but on the ability to explore natural beauty or the sublime. This conception originated with Kant (2000).¹⁰ Kant – according to Gell – inherited the Greek tradition, but he espoused it for the Enlightenment, which treated aesthetics as the part of philosophy focused on judgments of beauty or sublimity. Potentially universal judgments of beauty have as their reference objects with certain formal characteristics, recognizable as an aesthetic tendency for tracing the 'end,' the 'final purpose.' Coote followed Kant's footsteps. He treated aesthetics as a critique of taste that was dominated by the domain of object evaluation or a method of representation as a source of delight, detached from practical

⁹ I follow here Gell (1995).

¹⁰ Coote refers to the thesis of Nick Zangwill (1986), who defends aesthetics and the metaphysics of beauty as prime with respect to esthetic experiences.

interests. According to Gell, Coote was an anti-functional, believing that the perception of beauty was disinterested, independent of human desires, and that beauty was contemplative.

5. 'Chicken-and-Egg?' The Anthropological Underpinnings of Aesthetics

Coote, in his paper *"Marvels of Everyday Vision": The Anthropology of Aesthetics and the Cattle-Keeping Nilotes*, followed Franz Boas,¹¹ who had observed that every culture selected certain features of the natural environment to confirm the values against which we measure our existence. Thus, we verify our own environment in terms of artworks. Consistently following Kant and drawing from the cultural assumptions of the American anthropologist, Coote attributed to the Dinka an aesthetic attitude, and consequently, this implied that the Dinka also conceived of steers as a source of moral enlightenment. Coote claimed that the Dinka, who did not produce artworks, had clear aesthetic assumptions that were culturally coded and transmitted to other layers of culture, such as relations in the tribe between relatives, religious beliefs or morality. The community was characterized by predispositions, including toward visual elements such as color, pattern or shape. These determined the people's aesthetic tastes and their hierarchy of values, which then guided the Dinkas' behavior.

For Coote, the admiration of the young men for the animals was a manifestation of their aesthetic preferences; for Gell, it expressed their rivalry, which was mediated by the care of the ox and the singing of ox-songs. It did not necessarily mean, however, that the boys conceived of the cattle as beautiful and that this was the reason that they composed songs. Gell claimed that they composed the songs precisely because they competed with each other. To the ethnographer, it was obvious that a 19-year-old Nuer was concerned with outperforming his peers. Beauty was thus created on the foundation of the social rivalry, and poems or songs were just the means of its implementation.

Gell claimed that for the Dinka, their care of the cattle was not a disinterested activity. Their hope was likely that victory – recognition by the tribal society – would help them gain coveted partner-wives. The aim of the young men was to form "an ox-personality." If, however, this attitude was in fact not disinterested, one of the fundamental Kantian pillars of Coote's theory would be threatened. The problem of the primacy of aesthetics and art can be considered in terms of the Dinka situation as follows: What came first, the adored mottled oxen, or the attempts to satisfy individual and social desires and needs?

First, Gell advanced Coote's initial argument acknowledging that the Dinka indeed developed art, and this art was relatively advanced. It was the art of decorating the oxen, but above all of creating and performing ox-songs. These

¹¹ See, for example, chapter 10 of Boas (1955).

songs did not refer to the appearance of the oxen, and even if they mentioned it, it mostly served a metaphorical function.

The thesis on the independence of the anthropology of aesthetics from the anthropology of art, according to Gell, thus failed. He claimed that the Dinka had aesthetics only insofar as they had art, as they in fact did, and a splendid one. This art emerged from everyday artistic practices, inseparable from everyday forms of social relations. "Daily, unguided aesthetic vision is a myth," wrote Gell (1995, 225). The problem was that the aesthetic conception of art did not fit the art cultivated by the Dinka. Gell proposed a simplification in accounting for the Nuer's conception of art, and he used the Western conceptual framework. He drew parallels between this conception, as an institutional conception with interpretative elements, and the popular ideas of Arthur Danto and George Dickie. The whole Dinka society took part (in the form of the local 'artworld') in the competition among the young men by listening to the songs, observing the ox taken care of by the boy, and deciding who was winning 'the competition,' i.e., whose art was better. The result of the song was the aestheticization of the ox and its establishment as the artwork exhibited for the audience.

The ox was not an artifactual work, but a living and natural element of reality. While the songs were potential rather than actual artworks, they were primarily a form of the public nexus between the owner and his animal, between the young man and the Dinka community. It is this relationship that made the ox, and especially the ox-song, artwork. These songs were a testimony not of the existence of 'everyday' aesthetics but of the primeness of agentic activities and artistic practice, which was part of Dinka life, expressing the spirit of rivalry.

The spirit of rivalry in community life is a universal condition. Even in the Western world, as we look at works of art or listen to them, we, as recipients, tend to compare them – the power they have to impact mood, intellect, or individual or social life, the efficiency of the artists' performance – while creators compare the techniques and resources used for production. The Western world has created a sophisticated mercantile form of 'the artworld,' which determines membership in the most valued artistic elite and those whose artwork fails to receive (financial) recognition. The anthropological perspective of the art/artifact as autonomous with regard to the prioritization of the meaning of beauty and money, artistry and aesthetics, provides a truly universal approach that encompasses every person and community, whenever and wherever they existed or exist. Moreover, it concerns intrinsic human reality, since it is not determined by the cultural preferences of social regions but concerns the fundamental condition of human actions in society (as the creation of a nexus).

Works of art, or any other kinds of artifacts, within the intentional social network fulfill a very important role: they inspire action and orient it (by means of abduction), while aesthetics as perception and judgment is formed by means of social impact – through the mediation of artifacts or the performer's body (e.g., a function of the dancer) – as social agency.

6. Concluding Remarks on the Ontological and Gnoseological Dimensions

The anthropological perspective on aesthetics, as argued, undermines the fundamental assumptions of aesthetics and leads us to broaden the scope of art studies beyond the influence of the Western world and the commonly delineated historical period. Of course, similar attempts can also be found within aesthetics, broadly continuing its Kantian legacy, such as the conceptions proposed by Jerome Stolnitz, Ernst Gombrich, or Nick Zangwill. However, the ambitions of anthropology – especially in Gell’s approach – are more thoroughgoing. The author of *Art and Agency*, for the reasons discussed earlier in this paper, claimed that it is not possible to form a proper object of inquiry with respect to art within the domain of culture studies. Hence, the anthropology of aesthetics and philosophical aesthetics, which aims to form (supra-cultural) criteria of beauty (aesthetic values) or to identify determinants of aesthetic experience, are doomed to failure, or at least to the confining of their respective conceptual and inferential frameworks to the regions of the West.

As claimed by Gell, if people perceive some objects in one way rather than another, it is not because it reflects their aesthetic preferences but is because people everywhere always think and act according to fundamental logical principles.¹² These principles helped them to survive and develop as a society. Detachment from the underlying social-ontological assumptions in explaining the motives of artistic activities or aesthetic preferences would turn investigations away from a specific person in a specific community, resulting in highly sophisticated and unverifiable deductive processes. This is what happened in Western society when its mode of functioning became determined by theoretical speculation and technological innovation. Therefore, according to Gell, any formula of ‘cultural’ aesthetics is doomed to failure. Likewise, philosophical aesthetics has ended up in a deadlock in its search for universal definitions of beauty. (Gell 1995)

Gombrich’s motto from Coote’s article *Art and Illusion* on the need to do justice to the mysteries of daily perceived images became for the manager of the Oxford museum a prerequisite for the analysis of aesthetic evaluation by Africans of the physical qualities of elements of their natural environment. In contrast, by consistently advancing the perspective of social anthropology, Gell claimed that the admiration for cattle resulted from the more basic experiences of youth in Africa and in other parts of the world – from the condition of their social relations, dependent upon youth rivalry. This competition raised the need for expression in terms of a certain (determined by the group’s traditions) set of means and methods. In the case of the Dinka, it was the care and embellishment of cattle as well as the creation of songs. In the case of other social groups, it may well derive from other forms of social competition.

¹² In numerous writings, Gell tended to show the universality of human nature, which stems from cognitive capacity. See, for example Gell (1985).

Anthropology and aesthetics have been treated as closely related disciplines, especially with regard to their supposedly overlapping scope of research topics. This tendency is evidenced by numerous attempts at boundary crossing, as illustrated in my paper on Coote's proposal, but also by the aforementioned works of Forge or Morphy and Sally Price and by various recent accomplishments in the theory of art and aesthetics and Arnd Schneider's ethnography (Schneider 2008). While against the background of these endeavors Gell's conception appears novel, its consistently social character may be taken as a proposition of how to constitute universal aesthetic ideas. The latter, of course, also include the idea of aesthetics, not as prime, but as derived from inquiries on the existential dimension of human agency, which generates social relations and actions and the ensuing artworks.

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