ONE

The Traffic in Art and Culture: An Introduction

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This volume collects a set of essays that signal a new relationship of anthropology to the study of art, one in which the historical boundaries and affinities between these domains are recognized. In contrast to a previous paradigmatic anthropology of art that was concerned principally with mediating non-Western objects and aesthetics to Western audiences, the work here engages Western art worlds themselves, casting a critical light on mediation itself, and proposes a renegotiation of the relationship between art and anthropology. The need for such a renegotiation is clear, given some obvious mutualities: on the one hand, so much of the traditional anthropological concern with “art” has focused in one way or another on whether a separate domain of aesthetic objects (or practices) exists in different cultures (see, for example, Coote and Shelton 1992; Gell 1992); on the other hand, Western critics also have been deeply involved in challenging the universality and essentialism of the category of art, drawing not infrequently on anthropological studies to make their points. More recently, in contemporary cultural life, art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life. From this perspective, the two arenas in which culture is examined are in a more complex and overlapping relationship to one another than ever before.

A critical anthropology of art is distinguished from earlier efforts and from other disciplinary approaches by acknowledging that anthropology itself is implicated with the very subject matter that it wants to make its object of study: art worlds. Our perspective differs, for example, from most sociological studies of art, in which a very specific, historically situated subject is assimilated to a generalizing and abstracting conceptual discourse of objectivity and neutrality. Howard Becker’s classic study, Art Worlds (1982), is undeniably brilliant in its ethnographic acuity about art institutions and subcultures; however, the potential of the work to
be an engaged form of cultural criticism—an engagement that depends on a *working identity*, a sort of recognition of parallel roles, between the critical ethnographer and the art critics—is suppressed by a greater concern with constructing general social theory. There is a distinctive and telling irony here about the production of objectivities. Becker is himself a talented participant in art worlds (musician, photographer, dramatist) who knows these worlds intimately in practice. Yet, in writing microsociology in dialogue with a mainstream discipline, Becker seems to keep his own artistic side at a distance.³

In the anthropology of art, as with other contemporary locations of ethnographic research, it is no longer possible for anthropologists to address subjects “cleanly”—that is, as subjects in relation to whom they, or their discipline of study, do not already have a history of relations. Indeed, such a history, no matter how submerged, must become an integral part of any contemporary research, and this seems nowhere more important than in the cases of those art practices in which anthropological conceptions of “culture” and “difference” have been so heavily entangled with the practices of museums, collectors, and markets.

The critical circumstance to which we refer has recently surfaced with increased theoretical force, but it has a particularly long history and a hidden presence in anthropology’s complex identification with its subjects and its cultural authority, between concerns about ethnocentrism and sustaining the “native’s point of view,” on the one hand, and its determination to classify and compare different cultures, on the other. Our subjects, typically, have been people who were marginal, colonized, or otherwise peripheral to the standard narratives of world histories produced in the West. As a consequence of this historical location, what might be called the “critical ambivalence” toward subjects creates a tension between a desire for the creation of distanced, objective knowledge of independently constituted subjects of study and an awareness of existing relationships (of power and histories) which make anthropology itself already a part of such subjects of study.⁴ The essays in this volume make a significant contribution to extending and developing the insights from this legacy.

Our interest in casting a critical focus upon contemporary art worlds themselves arose not from any a priori determination, but rather from our own experiences of following trails in which delimited ethnographic objects of study suddenly expanded and transformed themselves. We each began with projects of ethnographic research that originally had no obvious relationship to art. In a study of contemporary American dynastic fortunes and families, Marcus (1992) found that he was regularly being led to art collections and museum endowments; indeed, his tracing of dynastic legacies led not so much to particular family members or heirs as to art institutions themselves. Similarly, after years of theoretically innovative but methodologically traditional ethnographic research with Pintupi-speaking Australian Aborigines (Myers 1986a), Myers found himself amidst the world of art critics, dealers, and museum curators where much international interest had developed in the acrylic paintings of the Pintupi and other Aboriginal people.
One of the most satisfying and exciting aspects, indeed requirements, of doing long-term ethnographic research today is the discovery of such unanticipated connections. However, for our purposes here, the discovery was not only of the connection of our specific subjects (members of capitalist dynasties and Aboriginal Australians) to a common frame—the international art world—but also of the affinities between our own discipline’s modes of thinking and those of the art world. Thus, the idea for this volume originated with the unusual difficulty we encountered in constituting art worlds and their discursive fields as conventional, distanced objects of ethnographic study in a way that had been possible with dynasts and Aboriginals. This productive difficulty is at the heart of most of the essays in this volume, as they generate views of the art world from their own implicated relations, both personal and disciplinary.

We should state at the outset that, in thinking through the relationship between anthropology and modern art worlds, we have in mind a very specific historically situated art world: namely, the contemporary, Western-centered tradition of fine arts that began with the birth of modernism and a transformed art market out of the previously dominant Academy system in nineteenth-century France. This is a world still defined, even with its postmodern attempts at transformation, by the creation of aesthetic experience through the disinterested contemplation of objects as art objects removed from instrumental associations. Further, the principal situation of our studies reflects the current conditions of the international modern art world and market, widely labeled “postmodern,” with painting and its modernist alternatives as the main line of development, and with New York as its center since World War II. This point of reference derives from our particular research experiences as anthropologists with art worlds: Myers through dealers, critics, and museum curators in Sydney and New York; Marcus focusing more on the fine arts world from the perspective of his research and year at the Getty Center for the History of Arts and Humanities in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, if we couch our introductory rhetoric more generally, we do so to demonstrate how what we and the other authors in this volume have to say about a specific, dominant art world might have wider application and relevance. Some of the papers—such as Steven Feld’s on world beat music or Judith Goldstein’s on makeover advertising—also suggest that the same issues we raise apply to communities, industries, or markets based on other expressive cultural forms.

One significance of this volume and its historical location, therefore, is to challenge such certainties of distinctive, bounded communities—the boundary between observers and observed—that academic practices have tended to produce. A concurrent development to keep in mind is the current blurring of traditional boundaries and the segmentation of art worlds by media and markets. The sweep of the postmodern debate has among other things engendered new and rather unpredictable sites of interchange between artists of different sorts and between artists and intellectuals, scholars, journalists, and their patrons (see Marcus’s essay). Our writing both reflects and is part of this emergence, as anthropol-
ology and its traditional subjects are increasingly involved in the production of art and the institutions on which art production depends.\(^6\)

**ANTHROPOLOGY, THE ARTS, AND THE IDEA OF CULTURE**

With this background, our starting point must be an exploration of the changing historical and contemporary relationship between anthropology and modern art worlds. The traditional anthropology of art, which considers art traditions and aesthetics cross-culturally (e.g., Anderson 1989; Jopling 1971), has been developed within the categories and practices of Western art worlds themselves. This development has varied, of course, depending on the nature of the medium (music, visual art, photography, film) and the real relationships particular anthropologists (such as Gene Weltfish, Edmund Carpenter, Robert Armstrong, Ruth Bunzel, Jean Rouch, and Gregory Bateson) have had with different artistic avant-gardes. Although anthropologists produced a diverse body of work, and exemplified a range of critical perspectives in practice, most of the traditional anthropology of art has been either *critical* of Western categories, by showing the difficulty of translating Western concepts cross-culturally, or it has *appropriated* art's own categories to valorize activities and cultures in its terms (e.g., by representing a non-Western culture as "civilized" or having "aesthetics"). In this respect, the existing anthropology of art has rarely been more than a complement to Western art institutions. As the impact of French ethnographers on Surrealists (Clifford 1988) illustrates, the anthropology of art has been particularly important in providing stimulation to avant-gardes.\(^7\)

The essays collected here present a different relationship between anthropology and art, its discourses and institutions; but the importance of recognizing the change is not to claim credit for seeing what others have failed to see. We should ask, instead, what are the current conditions that make possible anthropological attention to Western art practices themselves? The phenomenon which probably most generated our interest in putting together this book has been the recent fascination of the art world with the "appropriation" of value-producing activity on an international scale, with the assimilation of the "art" of the Third and Fourth World societies anthropologists have traditionally studied. Such work is not only circulating more noticeably in Western high culture venues; it has also become of theoretical significance for critical debates within the art world concerning aesthetics and cultural politics (see, for example, Foster 1983, 1985, 1987).

Anthropological writing not infrequently figures in these discussions as problematic. It is attacked for its objectivity and as an "othering" discourse by new criticism developed in relation to the art world's concern with the "exotic"—a criticism posed oppositionally and rooted partly in avant-gardism's long-standing orientation of critique in relation to the academy (see, for example, Marks 1992; Trinh 1989). Anthropology's investment in the importance of detailed ethnographic context for understanding human activity and products (see Coote and
Shelton 1992; Gell 1992) is also challenged—by avant-gardist emphases on “unmediated” experience, the thing itself, as bearing the potential for delivering the unsettling “shock of the new” on which avant-gardes have depended (Feld, Kirchenblatt-Gimblett, Myers, this volume). Finally, anthropology’s claim to be able to represent “others” at all has sustained a withering critique in recent years from domains of theory which have, at the same time, been inspirations for intersecting avant-gardes in the worlds of art and the academic humanities (see Clifford 1988; Derrida 1977; Foucault 1971, 1973; Said 1978; Trinh 1989; Torgovnick 1990). For their part, anthropologists find it especially difficult to accept avant-garde sensibilities that give centrality to “strangeness,” shock effects, and unbridgeable difference (see Kirchenblatt-Gimblett, this volume). As Diane Losche (1993) has recently argued in considering the problem of rendering Abelam aesthetic concerns within the framework of Western art discourses: “The recent issues of multiculturalism, primitivism and postmodernity are making apparent what may have been the case for a long time, the fact that in some ways apparently neighboring discourses within the same cultural context are as foreign and ‘orientalized’ to one another as foreign and not very friendly countries.” Anthropology’s “re-placement” within art-world discussions also reflects a change in the nature of contemporary transnational cultural flows in which what might have once been considered ethnographic artifacts enter immediately into Western art-market discourse of aesthetic judgment (see Appadurai 1990; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Price 1989). Navigating the translation between art-world discourse and that of anthropology, therefore, is particularly challenging, demanding a genuinely dialogical stance and a recognition that the boundary between “art” and “anthropology” has never been very clear.

A more radically critical view of Western art practices has arisen among anthropologists with a burgeoning interest in the study of museums for both ethnographic and art objects, and the historic shift in the classification of non-Western objects particularly from artifacts to objets d’art (Clifford 1988; Price 1989; Karp and Levine 1991). This interest is clearly part of the broader critique of representation and discourse that has generally affected the human sciences, and particularly so in the case of anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986). In this respect, these studies of the way that anthropological subjects and knowledge have historically been appropriated by art worlds signal a new direction in anthropology’s relation to art. From our perspective, however, such representation-oriented studies are very partial and only coincidentally address art worlds themselves—their institutional, discursive, and value-producing complexities—as historic and contemporary spheres of activity. Mullin’s essay (this volume) on the creation of the Southwest Indian Art Market emphasizes just these spheres of activity, exploring the institutions of patronage that linked American national culture after World War I, anthropological representations, Indian crafts, and the assignment of new forms of aesthetic value to objects.

There is an affinity between art and anthropology as discursive arenas for com-
prehending or evaluating cultural activity. Art and anthropology are rooted in a common tradition, both situated in a critical stance toward the "modernity" of which we are both a part (see also Miller 1991:57). The central issue for modern art has been the relationship or boundary between "art" and "not art." Since Kant's (1951) philosophical demarcation of an autonomous aesthetic domain of human judgment that was separate from both the means-end calculations of utilitarian practical reason and from the imperatives of moral judgment, the culturally constructed boundaries between aesthetics and the rest of culture have been neither stable nor neutral. If modern art has been preoccupied with the problem of, or the debates about, art's autonomy and the occupation of a separate cultural domain, anthropology has insisted on a holism whereby no dimension of cultural life is naturally to be considered in isolation from others. With a common heritage of cultural theory, participants in the two fields of disciplinary activity often speak a similar language, and yet—as with the cliché about the British and the American—are divided, or disjoined, by it.

From this perspective, for most anthropologists, the commonsense category of "art"—transcendent, referring to a sphere of "beauty" external to utilitarian interests, and signifying principally painting, sculpture, and music—would not be universally applicable to human aesthetic activity. Rather, the concept would be "subject to the critique of relativism," as the anthropologist Dan Miller puts it, "in that it stems from an essentialist foundation... but has become an established perspective through particular cultural and historical conditions" (1991:50). By virtue of cross-cultural training and experience, most anthropologists encounter the category of "art," internal to our own culture, with a suspicion and a sense of its strangeness. Yet, in this suspicion, anthropologists have also tended to reify the category and to simplify the complex internal dynamics of conflict within art worlds over the issue of autonomy. Thus, anthropologists' critical sensibilities, out of relativism, have largely failed even to recognize modern art's own internal "assault on tradition" and challenge of boundaries.

For their part, social historians of art have begun to understand the transformations of European life that led to the condition for our particular (Western) experience of an "aesthetic dimension" (see, e.g., Baxandall 1972; Burke 1978; Eagleton 1990). Following a line of analysis pioneered by Weber, they all stress the general context of institutional separation of distinct and abstract areas of interest—of kinship, politics, religion, economics—taking place in the wake of capitalism's development, or with the rise of the nation-state (Eagleton 1990). There may not be much agreement about the timing of such developments or about the definitive characterizations of the separation (see Clark 1982). But most theorists agree that there is an important difference between art and these other domains, in that—as Miller writes of the aesthetic practices of Western "fine art"—"art appears to have been given, as its brief, the challenge of confronting the nature of modernity itself, and providing both moral commentary and alternative perspectives on the problem" (Miller 1991:52). Ironically, the very category of "art"—as
opposed to "the arts"—goes unexamined in its own hierarchies of sense, so that various forms of popular performance, in which disinterested contemplation does not necessarily reign supreme, are excluded.

Our point is that this discursive separation of art from culture created a part of culture that, like anthropology itself, had culture as its object. This discussion of "separation" is not meant as a new contribution to art historical readings of modernism; instead, we are taking an anthropological approach to common academic and popular understandings of modernism because that is what influenced the development of the disciplines. Indeed, one must come to terms with the central problem of cultural theory in the recognition that the different arguments about this separation are themselves signifying practices—narratives—that struggle to define, essentially, what "culture" is.

Moreover, the very separation of an acultural aesthetic dimension and of the arts by sense intersected with modes of defining populations (class, race, gender, and culture) within nation-states. Implicitly or explicitly, aesthetic judgments and discernments of artistic value—a mode of interrogating cultural activity—thus had much to do with social distinctions of political substance. The critic Clement Greenberg, for instance, ([1939] 1961) founded his understanding of "art" in opposition to the kitsch of mass culture. Or, to take another example, Adorno's well-known discussions of the autonomy of aesthetics that arose with the bourgeoisie argues dialectically that "What is social about art is its intrinsic movement against society, not its manifest statement. . . . Insofar as a social function can be ascribed to art, it is its functionlessness" (Adorno 1970:336, quoted in Bürger 1984:10). Against the domination of exchange value, which threatens to reduce all quality to quantitative equivalence, therefore, Adorno conceives the function of art as "a social realm that is set apart from the means-end rationality of daily bourgeois existence. Precisely for this reason, it can criticize such an existence" (Bürger 1984:10).

Despite long-standing debates and challenges to the problem and ideal of art's autonomy in the West, for many people engaged with the arts the category of "art" remains a resolutely commonsense one, associated with essential value in relation to a generalized human capacity for spirituality or creativity. Why else the interest among art historians in the rock paintings of Europe's Upper Paleolithic? Anthropology has long resisted the most obvious dimensions of an autonomous art perspective, and indeed all boundary making, evaluative perspectives that attempted to delineate Arnoldian (or avant-garde) high cultures from baser ones. This has been especially true when such a perspective was extended to evaluate the visual forms produced in the non-Western societies (see Forge 1973; Biebuyck 1969) anthropologists studied. Although relativism's work of "recognizing difference" and rejecting ethnocentrism was accomplished here, no investigation of the very hegemonic cultural process that anthropologists were themselves resisting recommended itself. Despite some resistance to the extension of the idea of an autonomous art beyond the boundaries of Western culture, anthropologists did
not, apparently, recognize this essentializing autonomous sphere of art as something itself to be studied (rather than sometimes resisted). Sally Price’s *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989) has provided an important step in this direction by questioning the ethnocentrism through which Western art categories and practices of evaluation have excluded non-Western objects. Steiner’s study (this volume) of the African art trader’s manipulation and brokerage between cultural traditions places particular forms of boundary maintenance and negotiation within a specific historical and institutional context. From a more subversive angle, Goldstein (this volume) critically examines the (male) postmodern construction of a boundary between high culture and the so-called mass culture of women’s fashion and makeup advertising, the “female aesthetic community,” which establishes its own forms of judgment and disinterested gaze.

With their long-held sympathy for outsiders, for cultural relativism, and for life as lived, anthropologists have not until quite recently really given these “boundaries” much direct consideration. There have been two interesting consequences of this. First, in the academic division of labor between the study of “primitive,” small-scale societies and complex contemporary Western ones, the enterprise of studying artistic practices was left to art historians and “cultural critics” (i.e., the “natives”). The resulting unintentionally constructed boundaries between “pure” cultures were consequently left unexamined (see Clifford 1988). These critical practices and their positioning therefore became forms of cultural production insofar as they contributed to other kinds of stereotyping and representation of those beyond the pale of art history. Certainly, neither critics nor anthropologists imagined the specific boundaries for translation of the contemporary situation. Anthropologists now are less often “defending primitive cultures” against the colonialist or racist charges of possessing “inferior” culture than they are concerned to define the recognizable boundaries involved in an existing market for art objects that translates the products of “others” into its terms and values.

The second consequence involves a similar sort of cultural alliance in the name of theory. In the critique of “ethnocentrism,” anthropologists have generally allied with what sometimes appears to be a rather casual dismissal of “high” culture (see Price 1989; Stevens 1990:31). It seems fair to say that anthropologists are not very comfortable with the idea of “high” culture (possibly because they are still uncomfortable about elites), and such discomfort leads them to find support from art critics and others who attack the “high” culture pretension. While criticism of evaluative practices that distinguish “high” from “low” or “middle-brow” culture is quite varied, of course, many such critics perceive little content or value in such practices other than those of exclusionary “distinction” for those with taste (Bourdieu 1984; Crow 1987). Others emphasize what they perceive as modernism’s politics of ideological exclusion in an essentially heterogeneous cultural world (see Lippard 1991), a view with obvious attractions for anthropologists working on cultural “peripheries.” Here one finds both a radically reductive and relativistic political critique of anything that might pass as “high” or “dominant,” as well as a critique interested in inclusion
of the “low,” the “other,” and so on, as a current avant-garde means of destabilizing prior dominant hierarchies of value and the authorities of the past (see, e.g., Foster 1985; Krauss 1984; Owens 1983). Although these latter critiques offer a complex consideration of boundary-marking practices, their attempt to embed art socially is still concerned with art-world issues that differ significantly from anthropology’s consideration of cultural heterogeneities.

Such challenges to boundaries between high and low, high art and mass culture, have circulated as a major challenge to art theory as well (see Danto 1986) since Pop Art resurrected the Dadaist questionings of Duchamp and others. In the recent development of this theory, both artists and critics have drawn on (and produced) a range of current ideas about “power,” “multiculturalism,” “male domination,” and so on, to inscribe challenges to boundaries of distinction and exclusion. Indeed, for anthropologists, “boundaries” should themselves be subject to consideration.

The underlying tension in the debates that participants find difficult to acknowledge is the necessary survival of the category and institution of “art” for its own critiques. Why, after all, be “an artist”? Why not just be done with the whole business? This is a question of genuine anthropological interest. As the essays in this volume show, the position through which anthropologists interrogate “difference” diverges from the art critical procedures that depend on oppositional or critical postures. To be an anthropologist is not merely to pass claims to intrinsic or transcendent value for artistic productions through the lens of other cultural constructions in order to recognize their nonuniversality (and therefore cultural particularity). The trope of such comparisons has, indeed, long been in use both by anthropologists and by critics within the art world, with relativism providing a form of critique that effectively decenters taken-for-granted authority. To be sure, the usual course of anthropological study—participant observation—accomplishes this. But in doing so through a living subject, such methods have meant learning to “go native” in a sense (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this volume), which implies more than a conventional positioning as a cultural critic in opposition. Goldstein’s and Steiner’s essays in this volume provide exemplary cases of the value of understanding something of their subjects’ conceptions of things, how they use them, in what contexts, and so on. Thus, ethnographic practice is both suspicious of any essentialisms of “cultural difference” and also wary of presenting its knowledge as challenging the absolute truth claims of participants. Ethnography, a research process “in which the anthropologist observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture . . . and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail” (Marcus and Fischer 1986:18), has considerable power in discerning the significant features of cultural worlds that must be recognized through the veil of multiple representations (see Myers 1988b) and in discerning the capacity of acting subjects to comprehend the world(s) in which they live.

Not only does this approach militate against judging the value of practices in schemes external to them and against accepting intrinsic claims to truth, but it
also turns attention to the question of how such practices and products are made to have meanings or are signified. Again, to take an example from this volume of what close readings can illuminate about hegemonic processes, the creation of the Indian Art Market was not the simple, inexorable development of an American national imaginary, but was, as Mullin’s essay shows, the product of a complexly located group of upper-class women whose interests, concerns, and dreams neither match nor reflect those of profiteers or politicians. The essays in this book are not concerned to castigate art-world processes as ethnocentric, but rather to understand them as one would a domain of value production in any society. We are interested in how discourse(s) about “art” and “art making” circulate broadly within society—within the art world proper as well as within the other institutions, such as primary schools, universities, and government funding programs, that might be considered its auxiliaries.

Readers will recognize that such a position obviously shares space with the considerable postmodern criticism of the universalizing and essentializing narratives of “art” (see Foster 1983:261, for example). Perhaps one of the most challenging properties of art culture as a field for theory is the extent to which the arts recognize the significance of culture as an arena of contest. Here, of course, many of our analytic models may be indebted to the very art-world debates we now propose to “study.” However, once ethnography makes art criticism itself an object of study inseparable from the production of the art on which it purports to comment, then the key issue of the integrity of such criticism is foregrounded. Far from being a devastating question, this issue of criticism from within that nonetheless continually reproduces the value of autonomy provides a key stimulus to probing the multiple valorizations of the idea of culture in the West.

Anthropological writing on art worlds, while it may come to have close similarities with the positions of art criticism, is significantly different from those positions in that it is not normative or prescriptive about the production of art itself. We do not challenge the claims of those, for example, who inscribe art practices as “spiritually redemptive,” but treat these formulations as signifying practices linked to others. Our writing is not, at the moment, concerned with defining “art” but with understanding how these practices are put to work in producing culture. Nonetheless, the anthropologist’s situation is not simply one of “wonderment” before this strange phenomenon because—as these essays make clear—art criticism and other art practices attempt to position anthropology itself as part of art’s own legitimate concern with “all” of culture, within the discourses of art.

THE TRAFFIC BETWEEN ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Why is the refiguring of the relationships between art and anthropology important? The significance of this project for anthropology rests in the fact that discussions in the West of cultural difference, homogenization, and heterogeneity have been prominently developed in the art world (see Foster 1983, 1985; Lippard 1991;
Anthropologists have been prepared by the frameworks of modernism elaborated in the art world to undertake our very consideration of these problems. This has been the case, we suggest, since the rise of modernism in step with industrial capitalism in Europe and colonialism elsewhere. If anthropologists have tried, in recent years, to come to terms with these changing conditions (e.g., of cultural homogenization, mass consumption) as problems, the art world remains one of the primary arenas in which discourses about cultural values are being produced. To put this differently, how we feel about or judge "change," assimilation to Western patterns, and so on, has been determined by terms established within modernist discourses about art. Art continues to be the space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested.

**Influence of Art on Anthropology**

The influence of art discourses on anthropological theories and frameworks about culture is part of an internal history of the field yet to be written. If this is a subterranean and spotty history of influence, there are nonetheless some visible outlines. The clearest presence to be discerned is the long-standing (and unsurprising) reliance within anthropology on understandings of cultural production elaborated within the Western tradition of art and philosophy. This is perhaps most obvious in, but not limited to, American anthropology, whose cultural theory has its roots in the very matrix of aesthetics and Romanticism from which modern art sprang.

In early Boasian anthropology, the inspiration of aesthetic theories was important, especially the neo-Kantian revival in German historical writing. German historical writing and its attendant methodological claims for the need to understand actions from within their own historical context (a concern with "knowing from within") were significant in the formulation of such theories of culture and central to nineteenth-century debates in Germany that delineated differences between the "human sciences" and the "natural sciences." The very distinction of "idiographic" and "nomothetic," around which considerable anthropological debate has revolved (see Geertz 1973; M. Harris 1968; Kroeber 1952; Rabinow and Sullivan 1984), was earlier inscribed in the rise of Romanticism, emphasizing the subject and its body (the senses and emotions) as well as critiques of "scientism" and reason, and in the formulation of a philosophical basis for the new nation-states—precisely the same space occupied by the rise of aesthetics, concerned with the senses and the body (see Eagleton 1990). The German historians—Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert—had no small impact on the formation of anthropological conceptions of culture in the work of Boas, Kroeber, Lowie, and Sapir. Stocking traces Boas's recognition of a holism in culture—as "an integrated spiritual totality which somehow conditioned the form of its elements" (Stocking 1968:215)—to Boas's contact with the German Romantic idealist and historicist traditions.
The influence of modernist art doctrines is clearer in Boas’s work on “primitive art” (1927), which seeks to demonstrate that primitives may be “creative” and “individualist”—the very terms valorized by modernist understandings of culture-making.22 Thus, the producers of Alaskan Eskimo needle cases (Boas [1908] 1940) were not passive recipients of tradition, as were Beaux Arts salon artists whom Manet and his compatriots sought to define as “academic artists.” Instead Boas saw them as innovators. They thus bore a striking—and humanizing—resemblance to the individualistic avant-garde which addressed its art to the changing experiences of modernity or challenged the institution of art itself.

An association with aesthetic theories and historiographic concerns is perhaps most marked in Kroeber’s work (1923, 1944, 1952), which regards “style” and “pattern” as fundamental to the organization of value culture.23 Drawing on a sense of culture as a set of organizing principles, intrinsically patterned, Kroeber’s writings coincided with the development of neo-Kantian gestalt perspectives in psychology that emphasized the role of configuration in the significance of particular elements, and with the beginning of the modernist appreciation of “form” as distinct from referential content.

Kroeber had significant differences with Edward Sapir, as embodied in the debate about the superorganic nature of culture (see Kroeber 1917; Sapir 1917), but Sapir, Mead, and Benedict all seem to have drawn heavily on the framework of “patterning” that Kroeber first elucidated. Sapir and Benedict especially turned in a direction more explicitly linked to art theory, in their concern with the aesthetic and temperamental “fit” between an individual and his or her culture (see Benedict’s last chapter in Patterns of Culture [1934]). In his brilliant essays “Culture, Genuine and Spurious,” and “The Meaning of Religion,” Sapir (1970) began to establish a critical stance on “culture” that not only evoked a very modernist questioning of received traditions in favor of “self-expression,” but also articulated the centrality of “authenticity” and “creativity” in considering the ordinary activities of culture. These terms are precisely those formulated within the discourses of early twentieth-century art. A genuine culture, Sapir says:

is the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow unified and consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relation to all others. It is, ideally speaking, a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless, in which no important part of the general functioning brings with it a sense of frustration, of misdirected or unsympathetic effort. . . . (Sapir 1970:90)

Similar themes drawing on Dilthey’s work, gestalt psychology, and Nietzsche are developed in Ruth Benedict’s famous Patterns of Culture (1934), with its nostalgia for aesthetic integration within harmonious patterns of cultural life. Nonetheless, Benedict’s work also shows the ambivalent, critical stance toward some of the central categories of Western modernity (and the contradictions of avant-gardism) that anthropological work on “the primitive” offered, especially with regard to the individual/society opposition:
There is no proper antagonism between the role of society and that of the individual. One of the most misleading misconceptions due to this nineteenth century dualism was the idea that what was subtracted from society was added to the individual and what was subtracted from the individual was added to society. Philosophies of freedom, political creeds of *laissez-faire*, revolutions that have unseated dynasties, have been built on this dualism. . . . In reality, society and the individual are not antagonists. (Benedict 1934:251)

Lévi-Strauss recognizes his debt to earlier notions of “patterning” in his self-proclaimed affinity to the Boasian tradition (1971), and in his study of Northwest Coast masks (1982). James Boon, however, suggests another pattern of interchange as significant in Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, which he understands as drawing significantly on ideas developed in French Symbolism (see Boon 1972). Indeed, Lévi-Strauss’s presentation of the ordering processes of “savage (undomesticated) thought” in *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss 1966), the well-known “Science of the Concrete,” assimilates the cultural production of Aboriginal Australians to recognizable processes of twentieth-century art. Both are opposed, as well, to an abstracting Reason/Science. Specifically, Lévi-Strauss’s analysis is indebted to principles of collage developed by Surrealism.

The borrowings are clearer still after World War II, when modernist understandings come to have a prominent place in anthropological cultural theory, especially within forms of symbolic analysis. One thinks of Geertz’s (1973) borrowings of the concept of “significant form” from Langer (1942, 1953), who developed it specifically to justify aesthetics as a way of knowing in contrast to logical reason; of Turner’s (1969) interest in ritually-produced *communitas* as a means of transcending the fragmented (or divided) condition imposed by the categories of everyday life; and of the universalization of the “problem of meaning” (see Asad 1983) in an existentialism-based symbolic anthropology. Surely, the meaning-seeking person postulated in Geertz’s “Religion as a Cultural System” (1973) owes some inspiration to Joyce’s modernist artistic hero, Stephen Daedalus, as well as to those existentialist theologians of a fractured modernity—Nietzsche (1967), Kierkegaard (1945), Bultmann (1958), Tillich (1952)—who figured so heavily in midcentury European literary work.

The recent anthropological uses of Russian Formalism—itself a movement of the 1920s and 1930s and a key component of the avant-gardes—have a similar, even more definitive, debt. In Jakobson’s (1960) model of communication, language can speak (referentially) about the world, but “poetry” is defined by its relative embodiment of the aesthetic function, a function in which linguistic signs come to be valued not for what they transparently refer to (their signifieds), but for their combination as material, palpable entities. As for painting, in which the representational function is displaced by the painterly (see Greenberg 1965; Greenberg is also a figure who came of age in the 1930s), so in poetry the organization of the sound quality of the signifier becomes a central concern. What is interesting about these borrowings is that while Western anthropologists use such theorizing
unproblematically as bases for interpreting other traditions, they often do not recognize that the categories they so deploy have been contested in their own culture’s historic debates about art and the aesthetic.

*The Influence of Anthropology on Art: The “Primitive”*

The history of the relationship between art and anthropology in the other direction is perhaps more important for us here—namely, the appropriation of anthropological interests by the art world in producing art, in writing about it, in marketing and creating a taste for it. This relationship is most traceable in the intimate connection between the development of modern art and the figure of the “primitive.”

The “primitive” has been a token of “otherness,” and thereby an image from which projects of cultural criticism could be developed. Once the central province of anthropology’s identity and scholarly location, the “primitive” has also been a central figure in modernist art practice. In so doing it has partially replaced the figure of “otherness” embodied by classical antiquity for the Renaissance and by medieval Europe for the “arts and crafts movement.” The European tradition of such “primitivist” yearning for unbroken community has been a long one (for example, the work of historian Henri Baudet 1965 and of anthropologist Jonathan Friedman 1983). If both art and anthropology have continued to retain their locations as arenas of cultural criticism, however, the concept of the primitive is no longer stable for either discursive community. What is of interest at the moment, therefore, is its changed significance.

While it was hardly central in an explicit way to anthropological analyses, the figure of the “primitive” was frequently offered by anthropologists to represent themselves to diverse publics at home. This is a connection that has been the subject of much retrospective attention in artwriting (as in the flurry of criticism of the MoMA’s now extremely well-known show, “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: The Affinity Between the Tribal and the Modern) as well as a primary focus of the cross-disciplinary concern with museums and issues of representation (see Clifford 1988; Karp and Lavine 1991; Price 1989). Moreover, the manner in which the visual products of non-Western peoples have provided inspiration for “art” developed in the “modern” West has been the subject of a substantial literature and criticism. Scholars have noted, for example, that the work of “primitives” has provided new and “different ways of seeing,” highly valued by an avant-garde concerned not only to challenge existing visual conventions as limitations on perception and imagination, but also in search of new ways to attack the status quo—whether with urinals or with “primitive art”—and in pursuit of alternatives to fragmented modes of being where art and aesthetics are divided from life as defined by rationality, mass production, capitalism, and the commodity.

Historians disagree considerably in their understanding of the emergence of such a set of discursive practices. Baudelaire’s ([1846] 1982) concern with the “heroism of modern life” and its lack of comfortable certainties is conventionally
regarded as a turning point that coincides, roughly, with (1) Manet’s move away from academic formal conventions and toward a genuine art market that underwrote art’s turn toward its own properties, and follows on (2) Courbet’s development, after the revolution of 1848, of an oppositional art that questioned art’s own status in society (see Clark 1982; Blake and Frascina 1993). Others regard the development of alternative technologies of representation (for example, photography) as either freeing painting from its historical limits or as forcing it to find a new mission in its placement(s) vis-à-vis the social world (Danto 1986).

A common view is that transcendentence of the fragmented, dislocated nature of contemporary life in the industrial era is a central concern of high art (see Miller 1991:52). In this analysis, “primitivism” is essential to the contemporary category of “art.” The “primitive” other (and its represented reality)—as evidence of the existence of forms of humanity which are integral, cohesive, working as a totality—functions not merely as the critical opposite to such an experienced world, but also permits the very characterization of the “modern” as fragmented. Likewise it enables contemporary mass culture to be experienced as “spurious” and somehow “inauthentic.”

The trope of the “primitive” continues to exercise considerable rhetorical power in the present, and not simply in New Age frameworks, as demonstrated by the much publicized Parisian exhibition, Magiciens de la terre (see Buchloh 1989), by the continuing boom in the sale of “genuine” African art that has not been in touch with the contaminating hand of the West or the market (Steiner, this volume), and by the critical responses to Aboriginal acrylic painting discussed by Myers (this volume). Thus, the critic Robert Hughes’s review (in Time) of an exhibition of Aboriginal acrylic paintings in New York is not surprising; he indulges in a form of nostalgic primitivism—as opposed to a rebellious, iconoclastic embrace of primitivism—suggesting that the paintings offer a glimpse of the spiritual wholeness lost, variously, to “Western art,” “Western man,” or “modernity”:

Tribal art is never free and does not want to be. The ancestors do not give one drop of goanna spit for “creativity.” It is not a world, to put it mildly, that has much in common with a contemporary American’s—or even a white Australian’s. But it raises painful questions about the irreversible drainage from our own culture of spirituality, awe, and connection to nature. (Hughes 1988:80)

For us, the important points in this historic relationship are three: First, the concerns of anthropology have been one primary source of innovation for the creation of avant-garde work in the modern art world, a key source of difference on which the engine that powers “art of the new,” “creativity,” aesthetics, social critique, taste, respectability, desire, and so on, has run. Second, the assimilation and placing of anthropological discourse within art’s own field has always been one of the operations of art discourse (in other words, that anthropological concerns have always been perhaps more of a motivated part of art world concerns than vice versa, or than anthropologists have tended to be aware). Third, this use of anthro-