

The Activity of Art

ART AS AN ACTIVITY

According to the philosopher Arthur Danto, art is an activity that is done “through the mediation or the knowledge of art.”[1] The activity of art involves the creation and transformation of an object towards a desired state, direction or status, whereby it is clearly identifiable as ‘art’. An activity, in turn, has been defined as “a form of doing directed to an object.”[2] Activities are distinguished from each other according to their objects. In the case of art, an object can be a material item, as is the case with paintings and photographs. It can also be less concrete, such as in conceptual art works, and it can also be totally intangible, as is the case with works produced in performance art. The objects within an activity are shared, manipulated and transformed by the participants in the activity.[3] The object that is the focus of an activity is manipulated within limits set by the tools and through methods employed by the participant actor (or subject) that in the case of art is called the artist. (See Figure 9.) The processes involved in creation and transformation of the object into art are also affected by diverse parameters that are defined in the context of a given community. Such a community can be circumscribed, but need not be limited, for example, to an Artworld.[4] In a community, such as an art world, there are other actors, like critics and art historians. Together with the artist, these actors participate in creating the object of art.

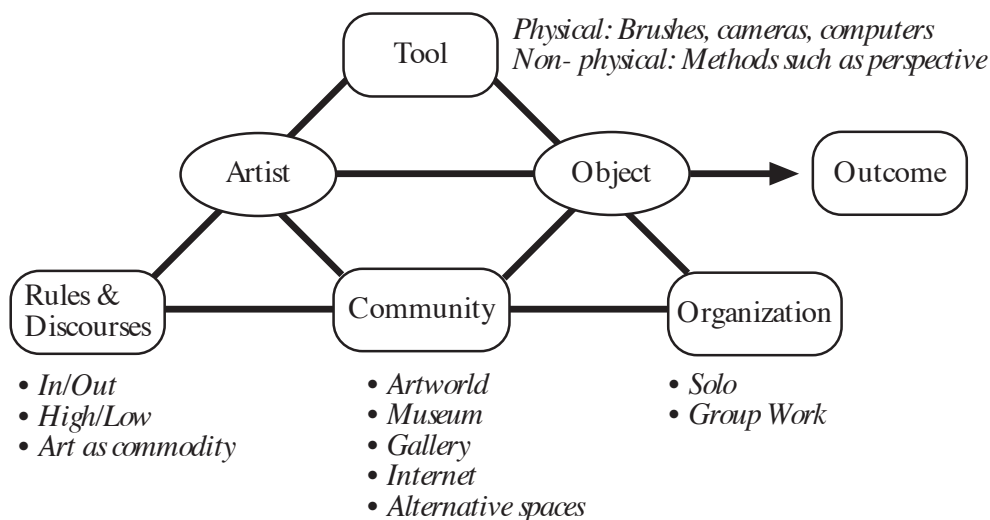


Figure 9: Visualization of the activity of art.

The activity of art comprises an interaction with and among many artifacts. An example of this are the instruments used in a medium, the methods employed to execute a particular work, and the form of work organization, which may, or may not, involve the artist working independently or as part of a group. The tools, or artifacts, developed and manipulated during the course of an activity carry with them the cultural and historical residues of such transformation.[5]

The relationships within the art practice are not direct, but rather are mediated through culturally and historically constituted concepts such as artifact, tools, media and methods. Or as Danto states: “There is no art without knowledge, without skill, without training.”[6] Conceptually and physically these intermediate terms carry with them the histories of the relationship between the different components of the activity. Thus, the brush, the pigment, and the support surface can be seen as the tools that mediate between the painter and the object of art. These instruments and methods, in turn, reflect the changing nature and idiosyncrasies of the art practice.

Though we may be accustomed to think of art in terms of a physical interaction with materials and media, the object that results from the activity of art can also be the product of an intellectual engagement with discursive practices. This was the case with many of art objects produced throughout the 20th century. Beginning with Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Readymades’ in which the artist made use of already existing objects, the focus of art was removed from the realm of the craft to that of discourse. In doing so, Duchamp propitiated the birth of the conceptual movement in art. This in turn raised, once more, that timeless question of wherein the essence of art lies: Is it form, function or conception? All three? Duchamp proposed that the essence of art was in art itself. In this context, the relevance of the artist’s work exists only within the language of art, and as a proposition to art.[7]

It could be said that contemporary art in the West is not as concerned as it once was with the interaction between the cognitive and manual aspects of the creative process. The emphasis has shifted to an idea of art as a way of interpreting things, centered, and solely dependent, on a notion of the artist as the absolute individual. The work of art proper, so to speak, is not circumscribed to physical objects but rather exists within an aesthetic and intellectual experience that is defined *a priori*. [8] Foucault defined the *a priori* as a condition of the reality of statements. For him the interesting question was not about rediscovering what legitimized an assertion, but rather what propitiated the condition for the emergence of statements, how they coexist with each other, their specific mode of being, how they survive, become transformed, or disappear. In the West, regardless of the skill involved in the creation of the art object, if someone with the proper authority and credentials calls something art, and if it is shown in the context of art—in a

gallery, a museum, or an art happening—it is art. This is why it has been remarked that, in order to understand a work of art, one must consider it as an artwork in advance.

This proposition would seemingly conflict with Danto's statement that knowledge, skill, and training are a prerequisite for the creation of art. It is possible that what Danto is referring to is how, in contemporary art, the explanation about the work--and the subsequent dialogue it generates--can be of more significance than the work itself. Participation in such dialogue requires preparation, probably an education, or at least knowledge of the codes and language used by those involved in the activity of art.

Increasingly removed from craft, is art turning into philosophy? Or is it that art is perhaps claiming for itself that discarded territory wherein meaning and ethics once converged, and that used to be the province of philosophy? And indeed, it has been noted that theoretical discourse of the fine arts has become “one of the most potent areas of discourse in twentieth century European and North American literary culture.”[9]

But art is also a collective phenomenon. According to Howard Becker, its participants are not limited to artists, but include a gamut of professionals working in diverse disciplines such as art history, cultural history, philosophy, and museum studies.[10] These subjective actors understand and help delineate the motives behind the activity. In the case of contemporary Western art, for example, Danto has identified museum and gallery personnel, connoisseurs, and critics as the “make weights” of the Artworld. Within their ranks one will find those who create the artistic theory that defines what a work of art is, and that, therefore, makes art possible.[11] And then, there is the artist and the forces that motivate him/her to create art. These are shaped as much by the inner emotions, needs, and objectives that feed his/her final goals as by the social forces that mold the milieu in which he/she operates.

As an activity, the practice of art can also be examined as having evolved over time, that is to say, as a historically developing phenomenon. Its participants, the role and identity attributed to them, as well as how the actual tasks are defined, change through time. This change can be observed by examining the tools used by the participants engaged in the activity. Classification systems, for example, are tools used by art critics and art historians in the conceptualization and institutionalization of art. As societies change through history, so do the modes of thought that feed these systems.

These changes are reflected in the culturally produced systems of meanings that form the basis of classification systems. Ultimately these changes are also reflected in the culturally produced

systems of meaning that form the basis of real world institutions. Thus, what is classified as art in the present, may not have been so in the past. The reverse situation also holds true: that which may have been considered art in the past may no longer be regarded so.[12] Glass painting, which used to be considered a heavenly art, has now shifted in position and occupies a space closer to the realm of craft. And he/she who, as an artisan, may have engaged in an activity such as painting, is now considered to be an artist. Conversely, the activity that is now performed by someone labelled an artist or a designer may have, in the past been executed by someone called a scribe.

THE ARTIST

In the activity system, as we are applying it, the first component is the individual or subgroup whose agency is chosen as the point of view for the analysis. In the present example, the point of view chosen is that of the artist. The definition of artist has been sociologically applied to those who comprise a professional group of people who practice one of the fine arts.[13] What the fine arts consist of and how this relates to what the artist actually does, is certainly a complex matter that varies throughout history and within diverse cultural settings.[14] A minimal qualifier would be that the artist as actor is an active participant who engages in a series of actions that ultimately yield an art object.[15]

As noted earlier, the artist is not by himself. The sociologist Howard Becker proposed that the artist works at the center of a network of people who collaborate and whose work is essential to the final outcome.[16] Along with other participants in the activity, such as art critics and gallery owners, the artist forges the object of art, its reception, and ultimate consumption. In Becker's analysis what made an art world, and what constituted art, was determined by involvement. This involvement stemmed from an acceptance of the artist's production by the art world.[17]

Becker further expanded on the notion of the artist by proposing a classification system structured along an axis of degrees of involvement. This classification included four types: professional artist, maverick, folk artist and, naïve artist. At one end of the spectrum, and with the most degree of direct involvement in an art world, are the professional artists. These were artists who, working within the confines of an art world, operate within a shared tradition of problems and solutions. Next in line are mavericks, or professionals who had training in the arts but have renounced or separated themselves from the art world. These mavericks do not heed the conventions of the art-world, but rather follow their own norms. Folk artists follow the

canon of a tradition and produce their work as part of a well-organized community. This community, however, is not structured along the same lines as that of an art world, but is rather made of, for example, household units.[18] Naïve artists are those who, without training or connections to an art world, manage to produce their own class of art works. Becker cites this last group as potential source of innovation, since their work might be imitated by art-world participants, and thus generate new categories.[19]

Becker's analysis may be regarded as narrow and, aside from the point of view of the curator in a gallery or a museum, unable to capture the multiple perspectives that forge the identity of the artist. He cannot really describe the rich network that weaves around the artist's intentions and motives for creating art. For example, in the case of artists who make folk art, such as quilt artists, the question of why quilts are made is answered in terms of its utilitarian aspect: "Because someone needed them." It is possible that the notion of art as a functional object cannot fully explain the role of art in communities and how, or why, it changes. Why is it that indigenous arts, and folk arts are now the subject of much attention? Why is it important now to have national museums devoted to the gathering of craft item collections? In answer to such a question, it is possible that the interest in cultural diversity is generated by affective connections that are not completely explained in terms of the functional aspects of an object.

A conscious realization of the existence of these positions and exchange networks prompted artists in the professional art world to question the situated nature of art and art production. Art discourses and the networks of relationships that they produce have become both the subject and object of art. This has been the case with the work of *Group Material*, twelve young artists who came together in New York City's lower east side during the 1980s. *Group Material* is a collective entity that sought to create art to support a more democratic vision of art, and promote an art of social change. It has done this by working on the notion of the art exhibition as a political issue:

In most dictionaries the word *curate* is solely defined as a noun referring to a cleric. But since 1980, the collaborative *Group Material*, has done much to transform the notion of exhibition curator into a verb by treating the installation of art viewing as an artistic medium in itself. And in the process they have challenged the Modernist characterisation of 'art for art's sake' adopted by most presenting institutions.[20]

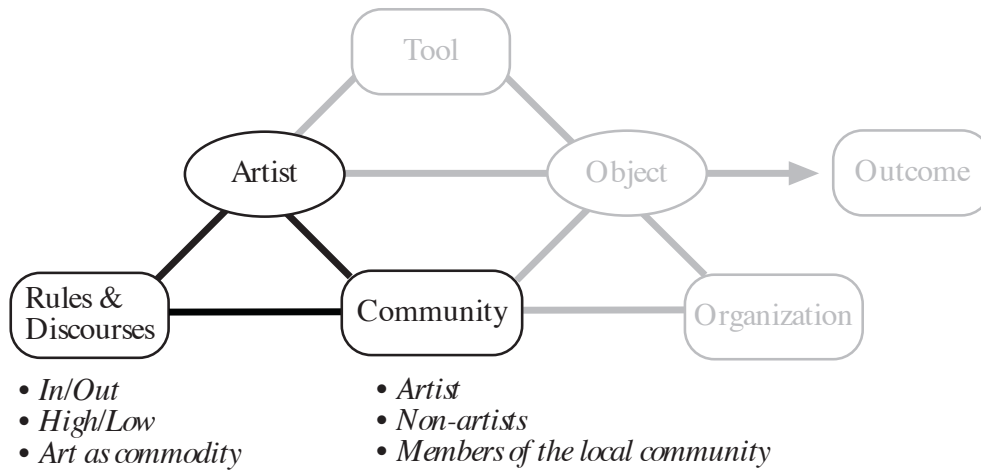


Figure 10: Visualization of *Group Material's* work with the notion of Community to critique Art World discourses.

Early on they recognized that, in order for the work to be considered art, they had to resemble a 'real' organised gallery.[21] So they rented a space and made it into a gallery. *Group Material* used the idea of gallery as a tool to generate discussions such as: What role does the notion of a 'gallery' space play in the creation of the art object? What is the role of the artist in creating such artifacts? Who deserves to be called an artist? Why? What are the particular discourses involved in the exhibition of art objects? How do the demands of the art market affect the form and content of art? *Group Material* addressed these questions in many ways. As the diagram in Figure 10 shows, to challenge the notion of the artist as 'star,' or as the sole repository and enabler of art, the exhibitions produced did not showcase artists as singular entities. The themes focused on social issues such as Alienation, or Gender. Artists' and non-artists' work was brought together into exhibitions designed to raise consciousness about these issues. An example of this practice was *The People's Choice*, an exhibition that combined artists' work with art produced by members of the households in the block where the gallery space was located:[22]

Our exhibitions and projects are intended to be forums in which multiple points of view are represented in a variety of styles and methods. We believe, as the feminist writer Bell Hooks has said, that we must focus on a policy of inclusion so as not to mirror oppressive structures. As a result, each exhibition is a veritable model of democracy. Mirroring the various forms of representation that structure our understanding of culture, our exhibitions bring together so-called fine art with products from supermarkets, mass-cultural artifacts with historical objects, factual documentation with homemade projects. We are not interested in making definitive evaluations or declarative statements, but in creating situations that offer our chosen subject as a complex and open-ended issue. We encourage greater audience participation through interpretation.[23]

How successful *Group Material* has been in creating art objects of relevance to the artworld can perhaps be judged by its ability to act as a catalyst in raising social consciousness, as well as by the subsequent ascent of its members within the hierarchies of the art-world. For example, the group has shown and worked in such art-sanctioned spaces as the Dia Art Foundation galleries in New York City. In 1995 former member Felix González-Torres was granted a retrospective exhibition in the Guggenheim Museum of modern art.

THE TOOLS

The second component of the model is the set of instruments, or tools, used by the actor in the activity to transform the object. These can be of a tangible nature, as are the brushes, pigments and canvas used in a medium like painting. They can also be of an immaterial nature such as is the case with methods that are learned through education. An example of one such method is that of representation through perspective, or more specifically, central perspective.

Central perspective was a system of representation developed in Europe primarily during the Renaissance. It has been proposed that central perspective emerged from the desire to find an objective basis for the depiction of visual objects, a “method independent of the idiosyncrasies of the draftsman’s eye and hand.”[24] Such a method was actualized in the notion of the visual pyramid developed by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise of 1453 *Della Pittura*. The treatise illustrated how to establish a new relation between the eye of the observer and the object being represented. In this new relationship, the object being represented could be precisely framed in space and time. This was achieved through the use of a series of vector lines, in the form of a pyramid. These vector lines emerged from the object’s frontal surface and converged in the viewpoint held by the observer’s eye. A glass pane, perpendicular to the line of sight, intersected the pyramid. Tracing the outline of the image as it appeared on the glass pane could record an exact duplicate of the image, as it appeared from the point of view of the observer.[25] This procedure could be used to obtain the correct projection and foreshortening in geometrically simple, as well as in intricate environments.

Central perspective provided a standard convention for pictorial representation of three-dimensional objects in which the ambiguity of object size and location was eliminated.[26] At a deeper level, it has been proposed that it propitiated a so-called rationalization of sight. This is because it is a system of visual representation in which space is delineated first, and then the

objects of the world to be represented are arranged within it in accordance with the rules it dictates.[27]

The use of central perspective in the representation of space in painting is an example of a conceptual tool that produced material results in an activity like art. Space and its representation, although an abstract notion that depends on cultural and historical factors, is made visible, or concrete, in the manner in which the artist uses his/her tools:

The pervasive notion of artworks as rare and valuable commodities notwithstanding, pictures are generally, and simply areas containing information of a different sort. . . Each picture records traces of the situation of artistic production, including aspects of an artist's physical and intellectual state translated through a brush, knife, or other tool into material features on the *picture surface*. [28]

At the individual level, what tool is employed physically and conceptually alters the constituency of the final object. Nevertheless, tools are not only used and elicited according to the nature of the object and action to be performed. At the collective level, the continuous repetition of certain methods utilized for visual representation in a particular domain can increment their influence to the point that they become embedded in a particular way of seeing. Svetlana Alpers has described this situation in terms of the formation of a *visual culture*, or a “way of seeing that simultaneously both reflects and shapes how members render the world.” [29] In the context of Activity Theory, this could be interpreted as how the selection and formation of tools is also influenced by the rules and discourses of institutions of the activity system in which the action occurs. [30] In ancient Egyptian art, for example, the representation of three-dimensional space was done in a manner that, at the present, seems two-dimensional to us. The method used was a type of orthogonal projection that utilized a single plane, and avoided foreshortening of the forms rendered. The canonical guidelines were related to the use of symmetry to produce as undistorted illustration as possible of the different forms represented in pictorial space. [31] And though Egyptian art may seem unnatural to our eyes, it is not less objective than the three-dimensional space within a window resulting from a rendering of perspective. One could argue that in Egyptian art, the way the artist used the tools was the result of procedures that were informed by different standards. [32] In the West, there are standards, too. These have changed in response to historical variations. As Victor Burgin has noted:

Space, then, has a history. It is not as Kant would have it, a product of *a priori*, inherently Euclidean categories. It is a product of representations. Pre-modern space is bounded; things within it are assigned a place along a predominantly vertical axis—heaven-earth-hell, or the

chain of being, extending from God down to stones. Modern space (inaugurated in the Renaissance) is Euclidean, horizontal, infinitely extensible, and therefore in principle, boundless. In the early modern period it is the space of industrial capitalism, the space of an exponentially increased pace of dispersal, displacement and dissemination of people and things. In the Post-modern period it is the space of financial capitalism—the space in the process of imploding or unfolding...[33]

The analysis of the invention of perspective, and its development and implementation can reveal much, not only about the history of art, but also about the history of ideas in the West. The notion of Cartesian space, for example, has been heavily influenced by Central perspective. As Erwin Panofsky maintained in his seminal essay on *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*:

It is not too much to claim that a pattern of tiles used in this sense represents the first example of a coordinate system: for it illustrates the modern systematic space in an artistically concrete sphere, well before it had been postulated by abstract mathematical thought. And in fact the projective geometry of the 17th Century would emerge out of perspectival endeavors: this too like so many sub-disciplines of modern science, is in the final analysis a product of the artist's workshop.[34]

The discovery of perspective, and the process of rationalization that followed the invention of this tool, forever altered the place of art within the hierarchies of knowledge. It gave the arts the firm theoretical foundation that allowed the artist to rise from the status of craftsman to one who works with theoretical knowledge.[35] It created a system of understanding that provided the artist, specifically the painter, with a formal descriptive apparatus like that one of a sentence:

The formal apparatus put in place by the perspective paradigm is equivalent to that of the sentence, in that it assigns the subject a place within a previously established network that gives it meaning, while at the same time opening up the possibility of something like a statement in painting.[36]

It could be argued that in this manner, perspective operates as a second level artifact. From this point of view, it allows for the transmission of skills with respect to forms or representation in art practice.

Perspective has also been analyzed as a paradigm, or a model of scientific practice that is considered as normative. From this point of view, perspective not only informs our perception, but it is so embedded in our thinking that it constitutes the *reason* for our perception.[37] While

perspective drawings are no longer used in scientific endeavours—they are deemed as inaccurate—perspective has a place in scientific inquiry.[38] In computer science, for example, through the implementation of virtual reality models based on Cartesian space, perspective continues to inform the understanding and representation of space. From this point of view, I think that perspective can also be described as a boundary object. It is the type of artifact that can satisfy the information requirements of several communities.

RULES /DISCOURSES

In the activity system, the third component are the rules and discourses, the norms and policies and, to a large extent, the discursive practices that regulate the flow of the activity. The art world can be described as an instance of a community that is constituted through discursive practices. The artist exercises his/her choices within the scope of a community that shares the activity of making art. The actions of all members from this community upon the final art object occur within the field of discourse. The term discourse is used in a Foucaultian way to indicate how explicit and implicit *rules* and *practices* are used in the production and regulation of knowledge in a community. Rules, for example, may advocate particular ways of representing a given subject, and promote the exclusion of others. In the case of art, we have already noted the importance of the presentation of the art object in a context that is recognized and accepted as an art context. Art that is not shown in a gallery space, for example, may not be understood to be art. Practices can include the ways in which a given subject matter is personified, or how a particular topic acquires authority and is institutionalized in a given historical moment and within a given community. In the case of contemporary art, we have already noted how dialogue and theoretical discussion plays an important role within the community of the art world, and in the institutionalization of art.

Discursive practices and the composition of communities vary and change according to historical conditions. So does the organisation, or division of labour, in an activity. In this context, the art historian Svetlana Alpers has pointed out how the notion of authority of the maker and the concept of uniqueness of the individual work of art are ideas that do not originate in the art practice itself. Alpers claims that they arise from ideologies of individualism and ownership that have been worked into the *study* and classification of Western art. In Alpers' opinion, this conceptual approach is problematic since it removes the object of art from its historical context.[39]

Art works, according to Alpers should be treated as historic *events* themselves. The activity of art can be seen as part of a social network. In this manner, the way the practice is articulated, the habits of vision, modes of cognitive perception, as well as social practices and historical conditions, become relevant to the understanding of art. From this point of view, the elements of the visual culture in which an art object has been produced, such as the physical features of the object, the materials used in its creation and why they may have been employed, the site of exhibition and the constraints it may have placed on the creation of the work, would be regarded as significant.[40] These factors exert an influence on the artist. Also, they afford him/her opportunities for expression. An example of this situation is the famous painting of *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein. In this work, the painter used the method of central perspective to render an anamorphic projection of a distorted human skull in the foreground. However, the distortion of the skull corrects itself when the viewer is gazing at the painting from a particular point of view. Art historians and critics have pondered whether the effect was the result of a conscious analysis by the painter of the conditions in which the painting was going to be exhibited.[41] Because switching the point of view from which the painting is observed triggers a different narrative, one can also consider that the painting has been provided a visual field, or representational framework, for a certain form of type of pictorial *ekphrasis*. [42]

Looking at art objects as historical events themselves can yield information about how collaborative efforts at different times, and in different communities, have resulted in different notions of art. Since the focus is on the relationship between the individual and the community, this approach can potentially reveal the submerged history that is unspoken, untold, and virtually unsuspected either by its observers, or its participants.[43]

As a historic event, a work of art can also be seen as an attempt to elucidate, to clarify, or as George Kubler pointed out:

Every work of art can be regarded both as a historical event, and as a hard-won solution to some problem. It is irrelevant now whether the event was original or conventional, accidental or willed, awkward or skilful. The important clue is that any solution points to the existence of some problem to which there have been other solutions, and that other solutions to this same problem will most likely be invented to follow the one now in view.[44]

Kubler's approach attempted to restore the passage of time to art. It also aimed to describe what he labelled the manifold shape of time. This shape of time could be explained in terms of sequences. A sequence was a serial ordering of proposed solutions to a problem. A new problem or question signalled the beginning of a new sequence in art.[45] In this serial arrangement,

actuality was the now, a lighthouse in the dark between flashes. It was the void between events. The past was made of signals of *then* to be recovered. Primary signals were the signals closest to the event itself. As historical events that emit signals, every artwork was made of self-signals that constitute the mute existential declaration of being, and adherent signals that are related to interpretation. In proposing that artworks were as tertiary artifacts, Marx Wartofsky indicated that in imaginative praxis, “the perceptual modes are derived from and relocated to a given historical mode of perception.[46]

COMMUNITY AND CONTEXT

In order to describe the relationships between the individual and institutionalized knowledge that is transformed into the art object, we need the component of community. This component seeks to describe a collective entity that shares particular codes for communication, and that participates in the production and consumption of meaning. The art-world has already been cited as the term used to define the different communities engaged in activity with the objective of producing art. A large part of the codes that define what can be considered as art is defined by an art-world:

Wherever an art-world exists, it defines the boundaries of acceptable art, recognizing those who produce the work it can assimilate as artists entitled to full membership and denying membership and its benefits to those whose works it cannot assimilate.[47]

Meaning, as embedded in the codes of communication, is produced and negotiated via the discursive practices of networks of communities, such as the art world. In the case of Western contemporary art, the codes that help to build and sustain the meaning of the art objects are quite restricted. This may be why it has been noted that in order for an object to be seen as art, an understanding and consideration of it as an art object is necessary, prior to its viewing. The meaning of the art object depends on its existence in an art space.[48]

As we have seen, the work of *Group Material*, for example, seeks effect a change in the context of how art is exhibited. The art context is created through references to the discourses that create the framework that is the exhibition space.

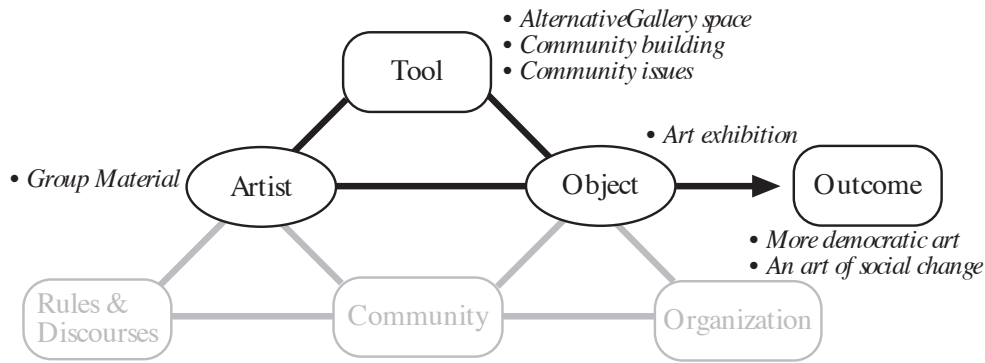


Figure 11: Group Material used an alternative gallery space as a tool to generate critique and reflection.

Whether it is in a gallery, or in a museum, a public space that is dynamically configured for the purpose of showing art, or the electronic spaces of the Internet, exhibition spaces are not neutral grounds. They constitute within their topologies social institutions. As such they embody the contradictions and competing interests of these institutions. In the case of the art gallery, there is the reality of business interests and how these may integrate, or collide, with the economics of the art world. In the case of the public institution of the museum, for example, there is the problematic of dialogue and participation. How does the museum preserve its authority role as the institution of knowledge regarding matters of culture heritage, while at the same time becoming more inclusive and responsive to the society that supports it? How do we reconcile the fact that exhibitions are systems of signs that express meaning about the worlds that they depict with the stark reality that museum collections are made of articles that are no longer part of the life cycle that created them? The case of the Internet, with the encompassing global presence that it entails, has yet to be fully analyzed and documented. Will the traditional relations of power be transferred to this arena?

The notion of discourse allows us to examine how context is defined, how this influences the way in which the object is produced, and how the outcome is, in turn, reintegrated into the system. We can follow, for example, the effect that the mode and venue of an exhibition has on the work of the creator. In the case of art, the system of gallery exhibitions that is a staple of the art world, creates a community, a set of habitual behaviors, and a system of exchange. The contemporary idea of the artist as star, for example, emerges as a context to support the staging of media events with corporate and private sponsorships that fetch high prices for the items produced by the artist. In the case of the museum, the concept of authenticity as used to define the rare and the scarce is the context for exhibitions that ensure long lines, revenue, and prestige for the institution.

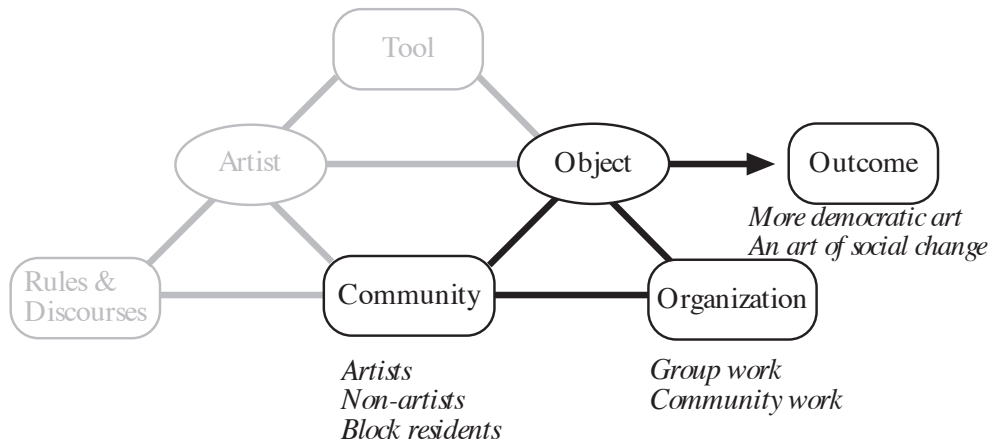


Figure 12: By working with non-artists, and block residents in their art exhibits, *Group Material* redefined the notion of art community.

In the case of the Internet, at least superficially, the trajectory follows an opposite path: the object can exist in multiple spaces of distribution. Still, the aim is for controlled dissemination of the exclusive rights, of the original copy.[49] The work of *Group Material* is successful because it is relevant in the context of critical art practices seeking to subvert the current state of affairs. By re-creating the venue—or the exhibition space—under different parameters, it reveals how the elements in the system operate. How the context of an exhibition enframes the art and its appreciation is restructured under more inclusive parameters.

THE OBJECT OF ART

Defining what constitutes a work of art is a difficult matter. The aesthetic experience resulting from exposure to a work of art, for example, is an internal experience. At the same time, what art is seems to be a constantly changing notion that varies according to historical conditions. In seeking to define what *differentiates* art objects from other artifacts, Danto proposes that art is “a logically open set of things that share no common feature in order to be a member of the set.”[50] In this sense, artworks can be seen as a class of objects sharing so-called family resemblances. That is, members of a set so constituted may resemble one another in various ways, and there need not be a single collection of properties shared by all members.[51] Furthermore, there are no fixed boundaries in the category of artworks. This class can, and is extended, so as to include new artifacts, as the need arises.

While category schemes resulting from traditional methods based on formal logic have, at least in principle, clear boundaries and common properties, categories assembled from family resemblances can take into account the activity as a whole. In this way, what defines the category can be understood as a structured understanding of the activity as it unfolds.[52] That cognition can follow these patterns has been demonstrated empirically through experiments with perceived similarities between representative and non representative members of categories. Cognitive reference points, and prototypes have been identified as category members that have special cognitive status—that of being a ‘best example.’[53] In the same manner, the understanding of art is also a cognitive response involving a complexity wholly different from basic categorization schemas.[54]

Art objects express, according to Danto, because one of the main goals of art, “may be precisely not to represent the world, but to represent it in a particular way, or to cause it to be viewed with a certain attitude and with a special vision.”[55]

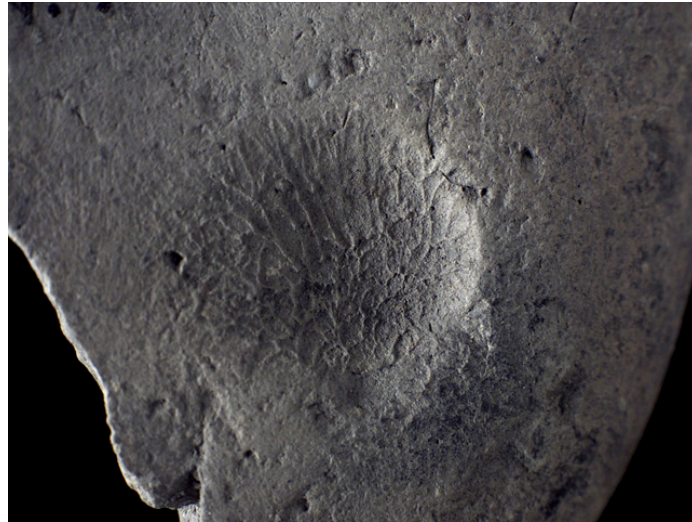


Figure 13: Late Iron Age artifact from the Mulli excavation site. It is presumed to be a loom weight in the form of a disk which bears the mark of an ancient fingerprint. In contemporary art, the object of art is evidence of the presence of the artist.

Contemporary art objects are closely linked to the idea of the presence of an artist. The vision that is presented through art is the way that the artist sees the world. For this purpose, art objects make use of communication devices, such as rhetoric, to influence the opinion of the audience in order to take a certain inclination toward the subject being spoken about with the intention to cause that subject to be seen in a certain light. The art object expresses what the artist wishes to communicate. In terms of history, the life of an artist can be viewed as an interaction with the shapes of time. The artifacts that he creates either adds to already existing sequences, or proposes new ones.

Danto suggests that the structure of art works is, or is very close to, the structure of metaphors. The potential for expression of metaphors is tied to the fact that they are not mere representations. Their structure is related to features, rather than to the content of representation. For example, metaphors might make use of intensional contexts in which, according to Danto, descriptive terms refer “to the form in which the things ordinarily referred to by those words are represented.”[56] The power of expression of metaphors is tied to the form of presentation, which is in turn tied to meanings and associations in the social and historic conditions of the times.[57] This thereby seems to imply that the mode of presentation presupposes the accessibility to concepts out of which the metaphors themselves are created.[58]

This view of art is in agreement with Marx Wartofsky’s concept of the artifact presented earlier. On this view, art objects are tertiary artifacts that result from imaginative praxis in which mimetic re-enactment does not operate as a direct imitation.[59] Wartofsky wrote concerning the role of representation in imaginative praxis that:

...representation becomes a receptacle for the expression and re-enactment of a wider range of cognitive and affective needs, intentions, and values.[60]

An imaginative praxis produces artifacts that operate as autonomous worlds. The rules and conventions constitute an arena of nonpractice, play or game activity.[61] According to Wartofsky, by presenting us with a possible world, different from that which is culturally dominant at a given time, the role of the artist is to re-educate us perceptually.[62] Hans Holbein's painting of the Ambassadors mentioned earlier in the text, illustrates these conditions. It is an example of an autonomous world in which the narratives, and even the visual representation, vary according to the position of the viewer with respect to the work.

Expressive Artifacts

The concept of expressive artifact has been used in archaeology to refer to "artifacts that in many cases were intended to communicate, to generate a response in the viewer." [63] In this work I want to use the term 'expressive artifact' to underscore the high degree of motivation involved in the creation of art objects. Art objects do not merely happen. These are created through the intentions of actors operating with instruments within specific communities. Their features reflect the activities that lead towards their realization. As expressive devices, art objects are forms that encapsulate expressions of an emotional state or idea.[64] Artifacts created through engagement in technical pursuits, such as craftwork, and that produce pleasure in the maker, can be viewed in this manner [65]

As expressive artifacts, the objects of art are partly the result of the intrinsic motivation that arises from within the individual who is fashioning the object. Similar to other artifacts, they are influenced by external forces, such as history and culture. The structuring of the mediated relationships between the object and its maker is dependent on at least two factors. One of them is a type of active reflection that manifests itself in the engagement between the mind and the body. The goal, objective, or vision of the completed artifact guides the flesh in the activity of making.[66] The other is a process of interiorizing whereby processes external in form, and carried on with external materials, are transformed into equivalent processes that also occur in the mind, at the level of consciousness.[67]

Franz Boas presented an example of this type of artifact when he described a bead legging, or ornamental item made of leather and beads, that is worn on the legs. In this item, the intricate pattern and symmetry in the arrangement of the beads, was not evident when the item was used.

The making of the bead legging was an individual action involving one person. Its distribution into the community through its use in an activity such as dancing, however, was not. The activity of making the legging drew into itself the community. Thus Boas argued that the aesthetic experience was present for the *maker while she was making* it but not necessarily when the artifact was worn.[68]

This is consistent with an observation made by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew. He pointed out that when we isolate artifacts taken from other cultures and admire them as art, it is important for us to realize that “while the early craftsmen made these works, it is we who have made them ‘art’.”[69] It is also in accordance with a view of art as an activity whose objects are produced in the context of a community that is a historically developing and changing phenomenon. How we regard the object of art might say more about ourselves and our communities.

Another example of the art object as an expressive artifact includes art objects that allow access to information about the unconscious. As an expressive artifact, the work of art is an externalization of the artist’s consciousness. It is “as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw.”[70] At the same time, as David Aldridge has remarked that “art has the ability to express the fact that we are dealing with *the interface* between unconscious and conscious material.”[71] That is, when we see an artist’s representation of a sunset, such as in J.W.M. Turner’s depictions of sunsets in Venice, we do not confuse these with the actual world. We understand that through these representations the artist sought to communicate something to us about his feelings and interpretation of these phenomena.

Artifacts of Expression

As artifacts of expression, art consists of materials or media that support, convey, allow or carry through an act of expression. Expression hereby involves not only emotion, but also an action and its result. John Dewey outlined the conditions, by which expression and emotion are crystallized in the work of art. Dewey noted that emotion and expression are defined by parameters such as causality, information and the passage of time. Causality manifests itself as activity, in the carrying forward into development and completion in the act of expression.[72] This is not an *ad hoc* activity, but rather it is informed by reflection that takes into account, for example, the value of past experiences. The activity of expression is a transformation by the gestures and representations brought into existence for the purpose of communicating something.[73] Time is the development of these events. The work of art, Dewey asserted, is “a

construction in time,” the result of “a prolonged interaction” in which emotion acts as “an informing and orderly principle.”[74]

As artifacts of expression art objects reveal how mechanisms of extrinsic motivation operate within the activity. The structuring of mediated relationships between object and maker is, in this case, dependent on how the process of interiorization manifests itself externally. In order to have a community, for example, it is necessary to have an already established set of internal parameters. These parameters are like concepts and values, implicitly accepted by the group throughout their interaction. Symbolic communication is only possible among members of a group who possess a set of preformulated concepts. Works that operate through language to comment, question, and define what art is, are art objects, or artifacts of expression. The work of Joseph Kosuth, which consists of using categories from the thesaurus to represent the multiple aspects of the idea of something, illustrates this notion:

I changed the form of presentation from the mounted photostat, to the purchasing of spaces in newspapers and periodicals (with one work sometimes taking up as many as five or six spaces in that many publications—depending on how many divisions exist in the category)... The work is not connected with a precious object—it is accessible to as many people as are interested, it is non-decorative—having to do nothing with architecture; it can be brought into the home or museum but was not made with either in mind... My role as an artist ends with the work's publication.[75]

In this example, the function or nature of art, if there is one, can exist only in an art context that is established *a priori*. The viewer must be aware of Joseph Kosuth, the artist. From among all the other images and advertisements printed in the newspaper, he must recognise his work. “But is it art?”, one might ask. Kosuth’s reply will emphasise how the aesthetic dimension is not of essence, since works of art are defined as analytic propositions that, when viewed within their context—as art, provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. According to Kosuth, the value of contemporary art is to question the nature of art. “Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions to art.”[76]

As an artifact of expression, art objects factor in the point of view of an observer, as well as that of the artist as observer of himself as he is engaged in the activity of art. As material manifestations of human action, artifacts of expression and expressive artifacts operate as external “webs of significance.”[77] They are not exclusive of one another, but rather point to the dual nature of artifacts and human culture as simultaneously internal and external, individual and collective, public and private, sacred and secular.

ART AND THE SHAPE OF HISTORY

It is this author's opinion that art is not a Stimulus-Response reaction but rather, a higher order process concerned with the structured and informed expression of feeling. Feeling in turn, does not refer to an emotional state, for not every emotion results in expression. Trying to understand how something like the expression of feeling is organized, re-directs us to what is referred to as inner knowledge, intuition, subjectivity and other forms of cognition that exceed the boundaries of conventional categorization.[78] In what sort of shapes do these forms of cognition manifest themselves? As a form of cognition that is grounded on sensory perception, the art practice remains beyond the scope of analysis by methods that ignore the role of the body and sensory perception in the construction of knowledge. As we shall present in a later section, knowledge can be efficiently structured using non-hierarchical classification systems and categorization schemas that allow for the metaphorical projection of the senses. This is of relevance, not only for the knowledge of what it can yield about the art practice, but also in furthering the study of increasingly important areas such as tacit knowledge and emotion research.

The creation of art, however, not only involves expressive behavior, but also, its reception by an audience.[79] And though we cannot say much about the audience of the past, especially in those cases where there are not written records, this does not preclude us from discussing how a present-day audience receives and interprets objects from the past. And there is a special quality to the artifacts that are created by artists. We witness how they undergo a privileged process of transformation whereby, having once been domestic utensils, perhaps furnishings, or graphic marks wrought with delight, they become coveted items sought after and given privileged places of honour in public institutions such as museums.[80]

The past is gone, but the artifacts and objects remain. This is a paradoxical state; a "duality of autonomy and dependency." [81] Its material existence is evidence of a heterogeneous and mysterious origin. The object is autonomous. However, once divested from the networks of knowledge in which it was produced, the object also reveals its vulnerability and dependency, for content, on its original maker. According to the archaeologist Michael Shanks, there is here a tension between the expressive (or significative) character of the object and its materiality:

If it were back in the workshop where the [artifact] was made, we might have a good awareness of its meaning. If we were the ones who actually made the [artifact] it would be very much dependent on us.[82]

This break between the physical existence of the object in time and whatever its original meaning was, can only be bridged through research and interpretation: Ancient artifacts, have a post-history that is created by art historians and archaeologists using tools such as classification systems. To portray time is the goal of the historian, regardless of his/her knowledge or area of speciality. Through this work, s/he creates history:

The aim of the historian, regardless of his speciality in erudition, is to portray time. He is committed to the detection and description of the shape of time. He transposes, reduces, composes and colors a facsimile, like a painter, who in search for the identity of the subject, must discover a patterned set of properties that will elicit recognition all while conveying a new perception of the subject.... Unless he is an annalist or a chronicler the historian communicates a pattern which was invisible to his subjects when they lived it.[83]

Once assigned the label of art, the artifact is deemed as timeless. The context in which it may have existed is restricted within the walls of the gallery, or to the display case in the museum. The function and purpose it may have fulfilled in the society that created it is no longer a necessary referent. Given that there is more than one history, how are the different histories of objects and artifacts constructed? As audience and observer, how do we recognize when we are leaving the realm of the ruined artifact, the fragment, the pre-history, and entering that of interpretation, or post-history? Can we identify discursive practices that affect how our appreciation of ancient artifacts is constituted? In what ways do they operate? Given the role of interpretation in these practices, how do they differ from the creation of art? In what ways are they similar? Will our knowledge of these facts alter our sensitivity and valuation of the objects themselves?

SUMMARY

The subject of art is of relevance to design and design research. To say the least, art and design share a historical trajectory, which although at the present is not necessarily the same, is reflected in the tools that they utilize. Creating artifacts of expression and expressive artifacts is among the tasks of the artist. Through this emphasis on expression, art can offer the designer knowledge about the processes involved in the creation of form.

The creation of art objects, even of conceptual art, is a subject that need not be off-limits but can be approached through the use of sensible methods. In the West, the activity of art exists within a set of discourses that influence the role of the artist and the acceptance of the object as art. It can be argued that these discourses form part of the episteme of a given historical moment. They are part of the structural conditions and discursive formations that enable the distribution of power in a particular direction that in turn influences the organization of individuals into communities. The artist does not work alone but within a society comprised of diverse communities that influence his/her practice. *Group Material's* exhibitions make sense in the context of a critical art practice that questions the commodification of the art object.

Activity theory can allow us to ponder about the activity of art while at the same time preserving the unity of historical conditions, such as discursive practices and context in which the object of art is produced. An issue such as perspective can be discussed from the point of view of material culture. Questions regarding the particular forms that visual culture assumes can be approached from a historical point of view. The idea of how an object of art is made is of less relevance than whether it is accepted by an art community. This issue can be revisited in light of what the role may be that art objects fulfill in communities.

Notes to chapter four:

1. A. C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Common Place: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 201. This book is a philosophical inquiry into what distinguishes art from everyday objects.

2. K. Kuutti, "A Framework for HCI Research," in *Context and Consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction*, B. Nardi ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 27.

3. Ibid.

4. Danto, "The Artworld," The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LXI, No. 19 (October 15, 1964), 571–584. Danto proposes that "...To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld," 580.

5. Kuuti, "Identifying potential CSCW applications by means of activity theory concepts: a case example," Proceedings of the Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) (New York: ACM Press, 1992), 235.

6. Danto, The Transfiguration of the Common Place, 201.

7. J. Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings, K. Stiles, and P. Selz, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 843; according to Kosuth, "All art [after Duchamp] is conceptual [in nature] because art only exists conceptually."

8. M. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 126–131.

9. P. Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft," in The Culture of Craft, P. Dormer, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 41.

10. H. S. Becker, Artworlds (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982). The book is a sociological study on the different actors and communities involved in art production.

11. Danto, "The Artworld," 582–584. Danto suggests that the possibilities for works to become 'art' are constituted through a matrix defined by the available styles and the active critical vocabulary. Whereas an artistic breakthrough consists of perhaps adding possibilities to the columns in the matrix, ignorance results in the reduced ability to participate.

12. T. A. Heslop, "How Strange the Change from Major to Minor: Hierarchies in Medieval Art," in The Culture of Craft, P. Dormer, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 55.

13. R. Wittoker, The Artist and the Liberal Arts, inaugural lecture delivered at University College London (Edinburgh: Constable Ltd., 1952), 3.

14. Ibid. According to Wittoker, though the word *ars*, means theoretical knowledge, the seven liberal arts refers exclusively to the Greco-Roman model that includes arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, grammar, rhetorics, and dialectics. Until the invention of perspective in the Renaissance, the fine arts were considered applied knowledge.

15. G. Bowker and S. L. Star, Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), 298: “Something actually becomes an object in the context of action and its use; it then becomes as well something that has force to mediate subsequent action.”

16. Becker, 25.

17. Becker, 226. Becker finds it paradoxical how certain works of art that are similar get accepted as art, whereas others are not. He concludes that the distinction between what is art and what is not art must lie in the ability of an art world to accept the work, and its maker, as art produced by an artist.

18. Ibid., 254.

19. Ibid., 262.

20. Franklin Furnace web site: <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/flow/gpmat/bush.html> (September 21, 2000).

21. *Group Material*, “Caution! Alternative Space!” in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, K. Stiles and P. Selz, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 894.

22. Ibid.

23. Franklin Furnace Online Archive, <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/flow/gpmat/gpmattf.html> (November 24, 2001).

24. R. Arnheim, The Art of Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye, The New Version (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 283.

25. Ibid., 284.

26. E. Ferguson, "The Mind's Eye: Nonverbal Thought in Technology," Science, Vol. 197, No. 4306 (August 1977): 831.

27. J. White, The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 124.

28. L. B. Molyneaux, "Representation and Reality in Private Tombs of the Late Eighteenth Dynasty, Egypt," in The Cultural Life of Images: Visual Representation in Archaeology, B. L. Molyneaux, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 110.

29. S. Alpers, The Art of Describing, as cited in K. Henderson, On Line and On Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture, and Computer Graphics in Design Engineering (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), 26.

30. Bowker and Star, 189.

31. Arnheim, 113. According to Arnheim, since it has been shown that sideviews of the human shoulder occur in Egyptian art as early as the Sixth Dynasty, this choice is not the result of an inability to deal with the problem of foreshortening.

32. Ibid. The maintenance of symmetry and an objective depiction of the size of the objects represented are examples of possible standards that inform this type of representation.

33. V. Burgin, "Geometry and Abjection," Art and Architecture Files #15 (1989): 36.

34. E. Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, Christopher Woods, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 58.

35. Wittoker, 6.

36. H. Damisch, The Origin of Perspective (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995), 446.

37. Ibid., 33.

38. Henderson, 32.

39. S. Alpers, "Is Art History?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 106 (Summer 1977): 1.

40. Ibid., 2.

41. Panowsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), 13–14. According to Galileo, anamorphoses have been used to create images that "show a human figure when looked at sideways and from a uniquely determined point of view but, when observed frontally as we naturally and normally do with other pictures, display nothing but a welter of lines and colors from which we can make out, if we try hard, semblances of rivers, bare beaches, clouds, or strange chimerical shapes."

42. *Ekephrasis* [Gr., pl. *ekephrasis*; Lat. *descriptio*]. Technical term of ancient rhetoric: teachers of rhetoric defined it as a vivid description intended to bring the subject before the mind's eye of the listener. The composition of an *ekephrasis* was one of the most advanced of the graded preparatory exercises (progymnasmata) designed to teach basic rhetorical skills to schoolboys. These texts suggest persons, places, events, and times of the year as possible themes for *ekephrasis*. In practice, however, paintings, sculpture, and buildings came to be popular subjects for Greek rhetoricians from the 2nd century A.D. onwards. *Ekephrasis* of works of art and buildings survived throughout the Byzantine Middle Ages and reached the West during the Renaissance. Artnet.com Research Library <http://www.artnet.com/library/02/0257/T025773.ASP> (November 11, 2001).

43. F. Braudel, as cited in S. Alpers, "Is Art History?" 8.

44. G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 33.

45. Ibid.; in the context of art, Kubler notes how "as the solutions accumulate, the problem alters," 33. And later: "The nature of artistic invention therefore relates more closely to invention by new postulates than to that invention by simple confrontation which characterizes the useful sciences," 70.

46. M. Wartofsky, "Perception, Representation, and the Forms of Action: Towards an Historical Epistemology," Models: Representation in Scientific Understanding (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979), 209.

47. Becker, 244.

48. V. Aconcci, "To the Viewer," K. Stiles and P. Selz, Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 764. Aconcci discusses the issue within the context of the art object in performance art and how it differs from art in a theater performance.

49. W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations (London: Fontana Press, 1992). This seminal essay treats the subject of the aura of an object in relation to authenticity and how duplication affects the existence and essence of the work of art. In terms of the Internet and the Information Society, the issue of authenticity translates to issues pertaining to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and the profits that can be made through marketing.

50. Danto, The Transfiguration of the Common Place, 58.

51. G. Lakoff, Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 16.

52. Ibid., 21.

53. Ibid., 42.

54. Danto, The Transfiguration of the Common Place, 174.

55. Ibid., 167.

56. Ibid., 181.

57. Ibid., 165.

58. Ibid., 175.

59. Wartofsky, 207.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 209.

62. Ibid., 207.

63. C. Renfrew, “Hypocrite voyant, mom semblable” [Viewpoint: Is there a Place for Aesthetics in Archaeology?], Cambridge Archaeological Journal, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1994): 266.

64. F. Boas, Primitive Art, (1927; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 14.

65. Ibid., 349.

66. A. N. Leontjev, Activity, Consciousness and Personality (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978), 35. Leontjev used the concept of perceptive action to explain that psychic reflection involves not only the mind acting on an object, but that the senses are participants, anticipating and acting as well.

67. Ibid., 58.

68. Boas, 29. A bead legging is an ornament, made of leather and beads, that is worn on the legs.

69. Renfrew, 266.

70. Danto, The Transfiguration of the Common Place, 164.

71. D. Aldridge, Music Therapy and Practice in Medicine: From Out of Silence (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1996), 97.

72. J. Dewey, “Art as an Experience: The Live Creature,” in Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger, A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 604.

73. Ibid., 58–81.

74. Ibid., 75.

75. Kosuth, “Untitled Statement” in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, K. Stiles and P. Selz, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 840.

76. Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” 843.

77. M. Cole, “Putting Culture in the Middle,” in Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996), 124.

78. Aldridge, 94.

79. T. Taylor, “Excavating Art: The Archaeologist as Analyst and Audience” [Viewpoint: Is there a Place for Aesthetics in Archaeology?], Cambridge Archaeological Journal, Vol. 4, No.2 (1994): 250.

80. Dewey, 3–13.

81. M. Shanks, Classical Archaeology of Ancient Greece: Experiences of the Discipline, (London: Routledge, 1996), 125.

82. Ibid., 125.

83. Kubler, 12–13.