

17

'PRIMITIVISM', ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE
CATEGORY OF 'PRIMITIVE ART'*Fred Myers*

In Sydney, Australia, in 1992, in a district near the old Rocks area now incorporated into a tourist district, the sign on the gallery door reads 'Aboriginal and Tribal Art Museum and Shop'. Inside, the objects range from New Guinea baskets and wood sculptures and Aboriginal boomerangs to bark and acrylic paintings. In 1994, Sotheby's catalog for their 1994 auction of 'Tribal Art' in New York changed the name it was using for its title, after protest from Indigenous Australians, from 'Churinga' (a word referring to sacred objects of Aboriginal people in Central Australia and specifically to one of the most important items in this sale) to the more general 'Tribal Art.'

Objects do not exist as 'primitive art'. This is a category created for their circulation, exhibition and consumption outside their original habitats. To be framed as 'primitive art' is to be resignified – as both 'primitive' and as 'art' – acts that require considerable social and cultural work, and critical analysis of these processes has fundamentally transformed the study of art. In this chapter, I trace how the analysis of this process has taken place in terms of discourse, semiotics, and especially social life. Consideration of the circulation, exhibition, and consumption of objects – particularly of what Webb Keane (2005) has called 'the practical and contingent character of things' – shows how their materiality matters: the objects in question under the sign of 'primitive art' are more than mere vehicles for ideas. They are, as Keane notes in following Peirce's understanding of signs in contrast to the usual

Saussurean one, vulnerable to causation and contingency, as well as open to further causal consequences.

Critics have been drawn to the constructions of primitive art; they recognize that the display and circulation of objects through this register has been a significant form of social action, distributing value to cultural products. In turn, the material form of these objects shapes their semiotic constructions; for example, certain objects – especially the portable objects of 'primitive art', such as small carvings – can be more readily circulated, recontextualized, and reappropriated than others – such as cave paintings.

By the 1970s, as scholars recognized that the category 'primitive art' was problematic as an analytic frame, substitutes for the category have been sought – 'nonwestern art', 'tribal art', 'the art of small-scale societies', and so forth (see Anderson 1989; Rubin 1984; Vogel 1989). Nonetheless, the category persists within a significant market for objects, even as debates about the category continue to inform theories of material culture. The interest in 'primitive art' has shifted to the problem of 'primitivism' itself – emphasizing the categories of the West and the meanings they attribute to objects from elsewhere and also (but less obviously) to the ways that particular material objects instigate ideological effects (see Baudrillard 1968). In this chapter, I first argue that the existence of the category 'primitive art' as a framework for the curation of material culture is part of a taxonomic structure (Baudrillard 1968; Clifford 1988) shaped by an ideological formation. Along with this first argument, however, I wish to

develop a second point through the notion of 'objectification', attending to the ways in which material qualities of objects suppressed within this categorical formation may persist and have potential for new readings and alternate histories.

PRIMITIVISM

The construction known as 'primitivism' has been considered by a wide range of scholars, in the past and in the present, and its origins have been found by some in the classical period (Lovejoy and Boas 1935; Gombrich 2002)¹ and by others more meaningfully in the concern of the Enlightenment to reconstruct the origins of culture shaped by a reaction against classicism (Connelly 1995). However, they differ among themselves, the argument of these works is that particular attributes of objects are valorized as an alternative to that which is more refined, more 'developed', more 'learned' or 'skilled'. Thus, the 'primitive' is a dialogical category, often explicitly a function of the 'modern' (see also Diamond 1969); the current consideration of the category is inextricably linked to controversies about cultural and ideological appropriation launched from postmodern and postcolonial critique. These critiques seek to identify the function of the category as part of Western culture.

As Clifford (1988), Errington (1998), and Price (1989) have shown, there have been significant consequences of this formation.² For much of the twentieth century, 'primitive art' defined a category of art that was, more or less, the special domain of anthropology – a domain differentiated from the general activity of 'art history' by virtue of being outside the ordinary, linear narratives of (Western) artistic 'progress' in naturalistic representation. Primarily, therefore, non-Western and prehistoric art, 'primitive art' (later to become 'tribal art', the 'art of small-scale societies', and even 'ethnographic art') was most obviously within the purview of anthropological study and was exhibited in ethnographic or natural history rather than 'fine art' museums. One consequence of this placement, noted by many, has been the popular identification of Native American cultures (for example) not with other human creations, but with the natural plant and animal species of a continent – suggesting that products are parts of nature, as if they had no history. Nonetheless, many particular analyses of non-Western art systems, the many detailed studies of local aesthetic organization and function, have value.

Because such studies were undertaken within a division of labor between art history and anthropology does not inherently make them part of the 'primitivist' ideological formation itself; essays in the well known collections edited by Jopling (1971), Otten (1971) and D'Azevedo (1973) can hardly be accused of imagining a unified 'primitivity'. Even so, the indirect influence of primitivism has remained all too often in other attempts to find local, ethno-aesthetic systems as if they were 'uncontaminated', or 'pure' of Western influence as well as 'allochronic' (Fabian 1983) and part of another era (see Clifford 1988; Thomas 1991).³

In a comprehensive survey, the art historian Colin Rhodes (1995) points out that the category 'primitive' is a relational operator:

The word 'primitive' generally refers to someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared. It is conventionally defined in negative terms, as lacking in elements such as organization, refinement and technological accomplishment. In cultural terms this means a deficiency in those qualities that have been used historically in the West as indications of civilization. The fact that the primitive state of being is comparative is enormously important in gaining an understanding of the concept, but equally so is the recognition that it is no mere fact of nature. It is a *theory* that enables differences to be described in qualitative terms. Whereas the conventional Western viewpoint at the turn of the century imposed itself as superior to the primitive, the Primitivist questioned the validity of that assumption, and used those same ideas as a means of challenging or subverting his or her own culture, or aspects of it.

(Rhodes 1995: 13)

This relationality may help us to understand an extraordinary diversity of forms within the primitive, what Connelly has called 'the difficulty in discerning a rationale underlying the chaotic mix of styles identified as 'primitive' (1995: 3). Some critics have pointed out that the formulation of the primitive – as timeless, unchanging, traditional, collective, irrational, ritualized, 'pure' – has been configured against the notions of the individually heroic modern person as 'rational', 'individual', and so on. Others have emphasized the construction of 'primitive' expressiveness and directness as superior to classical and learned convention. A consideration of relationality further suggests that the operation of this category must be understood within a particular structure and in relation to the properties of the objects themselves. A perceived (or attributed) lack of

refinement in the manufacture of objects might be conducive to the common view that 'primitive' art is more spiritual than Western art. Conversely, others regard such objects as providing a mere display of virtuosity and hence 'craft' (more material) compared to the philosophically loaded stuff of 'real art' (more ideational). My aim, then, is to illuminate the linkages between the ideological structure of an aesthetic doctrine of Modernism and notions of the 'primitive', and the materiality of the objects of 'primitive art'.

MOMA EXHIBITION: THE 'PRIMITIVISM' DEBATE

Much of the linkage between Modernism and the category of 'primitive art' was illuminated in the body of critical response to the New York Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition "'Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern'.⁴ The terms of the 'primitivism' debate as it developed in the art world should be understood initially as manifesting criticism of the famous Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and its ideological construction of Modernism. In marking off 'capital M' Modernism, following Blake and Frascina (1993), I mean a *particular* aesthetic doctrine rather than the whole of what I should call modern art. (This is frequently identified with the doctrine of 'Modernism' that, in Clement Greenberg's famous (1965) formulation, strips away everything 'nonessential' to an artistic medium.)⁵

I have found it useful to distinguish two significant strands in the 'primitivism' critiques. By and large, critics of the varieties of what they see as 'primitivist fantasies' paradigm have drawn on the Foucauldian association of power/knowledge to give theoretical shape to their efforts to discern the imposition of meaning and values on Native peoples. Those following this strand of analysis, best known through Said's *Orientalism* (1978), have emphasized how being represented as 'primitive' traps or subjectifies Others and has defining power (as dominant knowledge) over their identities. The exemplary case for such formulations has been the display of cultures in the museum or exhibition, a situation where local ('primitive', 'Native', 'indigenous') voices – if not entirely absent – were more muted. Indeed, a good deal of the recognition and criticism of these constructions follows from the emerging indigeneous political project that involves critiques of

the binding doctrines of 'authenticity' and cultural purity (see, e.g., Ziff and Rao 1997; Karp and Lavine 1992).

The second strand has drawn inspiration from the postmodern attack on the doctrine and practice of Modernism itself (its structures and codes) as a formation of hierarchy and exclusion that subordinates or manages cultural 'difference' that might be threatening to the values it instantiates (see Clifford 1988; Foster 1985; for a more general consideration of postmodernism, see Connor 1989). Not only does this variant of criticism manifest the struggle within art theory itself, about what 'art' or good art is, about what is 'art' and 'non-art' (Danto 1986). The significant insight of postmodern criticism has also been that art theory is not neutral and external, that formalist definitions of material culture as 'art' are themselves *part of culture*. They are projected and circulated as part of cultural struggle, as *defensive* responses to a surrounding context – to the threat to 'art', for example, of theatricality, entertainment, kitsch, and mass culture – threats specifically addressed in such well known formulations as those of Clement Greenberg (1937/1961), Michael Fried (1967), and Theodor Adorno (1983).

It might well be argued that such formalism placed materiality itself (the quality of the 'thing', its very 'thingness') – its irreducibility to simple ideas – in the foreground, thereby contrasting with older views of art as the expression of ultimately immaterial intentions, meanings, and values. The rise of Formalism owed a great deal, historically, to the perceived need to sustain a place for 'art' after the rise of photography as the medium of naturalistic representation. In this regard, Roger Fry's (1920) theorization of 'significant form' rather than content as the basis of true art provides an important precursor of the theory and rescue work of later Modernist criticism, such as Greenberg's.⁶

In the criticized definitions of 'art' – definitions which are regarded by critics as sharing the Kantian ideal of aesthetics as somehow distinct from practical reason and morality – art is *qualitatively superior* (if not transcendent) to other cultural forms. Critically oriented postmodern theorists, such as Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Craig Owens, as well as more straight-forward sociological critics such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), asserted that art's defensive strategy of self-definition (art's autonomy from other spheres of culture) was not simply a neutral fact, but was a form of cultural production itself – an exclusionary, boundary-maintaining activity, a hegemonic exercise of power through knowledge.

From this point of view, the deployment of 'primitivism' was criticized – or deconstructed – precisely as a relational operator of Modernism itself. The art historian and critic Hal Foster (1985) argued that 'primitivism' (the framework through which certain cultural projects were experienced and understood) was an instrumentality of Modernist cultural formation, in the service of sustaining and producing a Western identity as superior. The sense of cultural hierarchy and exclusion as *defensive* strategies underlies much of the critical work of the 1980s and 1990s, and gives weight to Foster's characterization of it as 'fetishism' – that is, something made by people that appears to be independent of them and to have power over them, hiding its own source in the subject of whom it is really a part.

MOMA EXHIBITION: THE UNANTICIPATED CRISIS OF PRIMITIVE ART

Even in the more controlled domains, however, since those material qualities that are suppressed do persist, objects bring the potential for new realizations into new historical contexts (see, e.g., Thomas 1991).

(Keane 2005)

The contest of positions and ideas, however, was not a disembodied one, abstracted in space and time. It had everything to do with the cultural power of a particular institution – New York's Museum of Modern Art – to define artistic merit and value, and the struggle of those outside it – women, minorities – to establish a framework of recognition of their work and that of others who believed themselves to be excluded by MOMA's doctrines.

It should be clear that the dominant notion of 'art' that came under criticism was the notion of an aesthetic experience constituted through the *disinterested* contemplation of objects as *art* objects removed from instrumental associations (see Bourdieu 1984). This notion of the aesthetic was entirely compatible with the formalist emphasis of prevailing art discourses at the time, although the implicit hierarchies of value were at this time becoming the subject of challenge. Critics approached the MOMA show on grounds of the inapplicability of the Modernist, formal concept of 'art' itself as appropriate for universal application as a framework for interpreting or evaluating the value of material culture. They portrayed the exhibition not so

much as a simply mistaken ethnocentric misrepresentation; rather, it was seen as actively constituting in its poetics a hegemonic ideological structure. The inspiration for such an analysis of the exhibition should ultimately be traced to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1966) influential but now somewhat eclipsed discussion of the *bricoleur* and 'the science of the concrete'. The curator/*bricoleur* takes his or her elements from the world's material culture and recontextualizes their sensible or material properties by placing them within an exhibition or installation as a larger whole, itself standing indexically and iconically for the world outside it. From this recontextualization emerges a particular formation of 'primitive art' reflecting, instantiating, and 'naturalizing' the codes of modernism. That 'challenge' is possible, critical and/or political, suggests the instability of any such structure, its inability to hold the objects' material qualities to its singular ordering. Indeed, while the emphasis of Formalism might be seen as giving greater value to material form than to intentions, meanings, narratives, or other less material dimensions of the art work, since only the materiality *within* the art work was admitted to consideration, other qualities of the object could be made to challenge the structure.

The critiques of the MOMA show had precedents. Work that indicated this relationship between aesthetic theory and politics – e.g., Guilbaut's *How New York stole the Idea of Abstract Art* (1983) or Barthes's essay on the MOMA's early 'Family of Man' exhibition (1957) – informed their discussion of an ideology in which art practices and objects were made to represent a generic but problematic 'humanity'. The 'primitivism' debates pursued a series of questions about the complicity of Modernism – a supposedly progressive, emancipatory aesthetic doctrine – with projects of colonialist and imperialist hegemony. They implicated Modernism as an ideological structure in which value is constructed or denied through representation. That this ideological structure was embodied in the institution of MOMA – an institution with massive cultural authority and connection to collectors and dealers – was central to its effectiveness, far beyond anything that might have been produced, for example, through the discourse of anthropologists. Enacted within a controlled domain, this exhibition was a high stakes cultural performance of the relationship between the West and the Rest.

William Rubin, the curator of the exhibition, had gained his reputation as a Picasso expert. Not surprisingly, Rubin organized the exhibit around his understanding of Picasso, owing

much to Picasso's own mythology – in which the artist's own internal history arrived at a situation (the critique of older models and conventions of art) that found African art/sculpture to exemplify formal properties important at that time in the West. Neither Rubin nor Picasso – nor Robert Goldwater, from whose earlier volume, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938), the idea came – saw the primitive as influencing the modern artist.⁷ The evolution of modern art, according to the MOMA narrative, was supposed to be an *internal* dialectic of liberation from narrative content towards an emphasis on material form. The 'Primitivism' exhibition's fascination – and the first section of the installation – was with the objects that Picasso and his contemporaries had in their studios, what they could possibly and actually did see – a brilliant, historical exploration of the specific traffic in culture at the time – with an explicit consideration of how the particular objects entered into art (Rubin 1984). A salient example was the Picasso painting that portrayed a guitar resonating with the form of a Grebo mask – matching the specific mask then in his studio and its appearance in his painting.

The second part of the exhibition moved to 'Affinities', as they were called, or general resemblances – pairing a prominent Western art work (and artist) with a non-Western (or tribal) piece that presented the *same formal properties* (according to the curator's grouping). Clifford and others pointed out how this installation functioned ideologically. Following the famous Barthes (1957) essay on the ideology of 'The Family of Man' – an exhibition of photographs, curated by Edward Weston and circulated by MOMA in the 1950s, which saw human beings everywhere as subject to the same concerns and theme – Clifford argued that a 'Family of Art' was allegorized in the MOMA's 'Primitivism' exhibition. Especially in the pairing of unattributed non-Western works with the masterpieces of named Western Modernist artists, the exhibition emphasized creativity and formal innovation *as the gist of 'art' everywhere*.

Ideological critiques have long been suspicious of 'naturalizing' and regard such acts of representation not as innocent errors but as attempts to provide legitimacy for current formations of power. Thus, to represent so-called 'primitive' artists as having the same formal motivations and interests as those said to be central to the modern avant-garde was to assert that the particular art practices celebrated in Twentieth-century doctrines (that seem conveniently resonant with bourgeois experiences and celebratory of individual and especially

male heroic creativity) were a human universal and to support the Modernist narrative of contemporary Western art practice as representing the finest expression of human art. Those so-called primitive artists whose work did not resemble the valued modern were not selected for display.

Postmodern critics have argued for a less linear, more decentered approach to 'art' – seeing 'art' as having less unity and having multiple histories, emphasizing a range of differences as equally 'art'. By seeming to discern 'affinities' that the exhibition itself constructed, the exhibition naturalized the MOMA doctrine of aesthetics while at the same time it abstracted non-Western objects from whatever context and function they might originally have had. By finding similarities where there should be differences, through this recontextualization MOMA's 'primitivism' operated, it was argued, to universalize the aesthetic doctrine of Western Modernism – emphasizing the formal, material dimensions of art objects as their central quality and indirectly supporting a separable or autonomous dimension of human life that was 'art'.

Anthropologists have been familiar with the potential that cultural comparison has for ideological deployment. Lacking historical connection and context for 'tribal' objects, the means of constructing typological similarities in the 'Affinities' section were very much like those involved in what was called 'the comparative method.' In the nineteenth century, in books and exhibitions, this method of cultural comparison undergirded the ethnocentric, universalist histories of unilineal evolution from 'primitive' (and simple) to 'civilized' (and complex).⁸ However, at MOMA's exhibition, 'primitive art' had a different – but still ethnocentric – function, departing from the nineteenth-century construction of cultural hierarchy. The view of art implemented by the comparison at MOMA and more widely circulating, as Sally Price argued, was characterized further by what she called 'the universality principle' – a principle articulated in 'the proposition that art is a 'universal language' expressing the common joys and concerns of all humanity' (1989: 32). Not only does such a principle of universality legitimate the view of aesthetics as universal, innate, and transcending culture and politics – the innate taste of the connoisseur who knows art (anywhere) when he or she sees it. But this proposition of universality is, in turn, based on another Western conceit – the notion that 'artistic creativity originates deep within the psyche of the artist. Response to works of art then becomes a matter of viewers tapping into the

psychological realities that they, as fellow human beings, share with the artist' (Price 1989: 32).

While she was principally objecting to the ethnocentrism of viewers' presuming to know directly what is at stake in the objects, unmediated by knowledge of their context and function in the horizon of expected viewers. Price was drawing attention to another variety of 'primitivist' representation.⁹ In this variant, the 'primitive' is more direct in expression, unmediated by tradition or reason – the polar opposite of the refined and inexpressive classical (see also Connelly 1995; Gombrich 2002).¹⁰ There is no doubt that Western artists like Picasso had their own Romantic forms of 'primitivism', seeing so-called tribal artists to be, as the art historian Paul Wingert (1974) said, 'more closely allied to the fundamental, basic, and essential drives of life' which Civilized or Western folks share but 'bury' under a multitude of parasitical, nonessential desires'.

Along this fracture line, Thomas McEvelley criticized the exhibition for its effort to demonstrate the universality of aesthetic values. The implicit claim of universality, he observed, operated in the service of placing Formalist Modernism as *the highest criterion of evaluation*. To make his point, McEvelley invoked in positive terms another trope of 'primitivism' (endorsing the opposite side of the ideological dyad) – the Romantic and dark Otherness of non-Western art. McEvelley claimed the exhibition accomplished its construction of aesthetic universality through censorship of the meaning, context, and intention – the excessive materiality – of the exotic objects:

In their native contexts these objects were invested with feelings of awe and dread, not of esthetic ennoblement. They were seen usually in motion, at night, in closed dark spaces, by flickering torchlight ... their viewers were under the influence of ritual, communal identification feelings, and often alcohol or drugs; above all, they were activated by the presence within or among the objects themselves of the shaman, acting out the usually terrifying power represented by the mask or icon. What was at stake for the viewer was not esthetic appreciation but loss of self in identification with and support of the shamanic performance.

(McEvelley 1984: 59)

By repressing the aspect of content, the Other is tamed into mere pretty stuff to dress us up ... In depressing starkness, 'Primitivism' lays bare the way our cultural institutions relate to foreign cultures, revealing it as an ethnocentric subjectivity inflated to coopt such cultures and their objects into itself.

(McEvelley 1984: 60).

A number of historians have recognized the linkages in which, for example, 'the burden of sophistication' weighing on modern artists 'had necessitated their enthusiasm 'for every primitive period of art in which they could regain a sense of seeing with the uneducated gaze of the savage and the childlike eye' (Leo Stein, quoted in Price 1989: 33). This view of primitive art 'as a kind of creative expression that flows unchecked from the artist's unconscious' (Price 1989: 32) has potentially difficult ideological implications. While the implications for those valorizing 'directness' of expression or refusing the conventions of the past may point in one direction, the comparison of primitive art and children's drawings that valorizes this formation has also been recognized to underwrite some doctrines of racial inferiority.

TIME AND THE OTHER

Another significant criticism of the way the category 'primitive art' operates addresses the neutralization of Time, following Johannes Fabian's (1983) important discussion of allochronic and coeval perspectives. In the former, a temporal distancing technique exemplified by some kinds of traditional ethnographic writing, non-Western people are represented as existing in some other time than the writer, not as part of the same history. A coeval perspective, in contrast, emphasizes their copresence. Some connoisseurs have assumed that there were – at some time – isolated cultures projecting their own 'spirit' or cultural essence into their objects. In the MOMA show, and other exhibitions, Clifford (1988) pointed out, the objects of 'primitive art' were typically identified by 'tribal group', implying a stylistic consensus, without individual authorship (implying a collectivity), and without much temporal location. When operating in the project of defining – by contrast or similarity – 'us', the 'primitive' and his or her objects tend not to be seen within their own histories and contexts. The effect is to suggest that nothing happens over time in these homogeneous and apparently unchanging primitive, traditional societies. Such societies appear to exemplify Eliade's (1959) archetype of repetition in societies dominated by ritual rather than history.

The 'primitivism' debates revealed how the opposed categories of 'primitive' and 'modern', as 'tradition' and 'innovation' respectively, might regulate the fabricated boundaries between the modern West and a supposedly

premodern Other. In drawing attention to the neutralization of Time, and borrowing from Fabian (1983), Clifford's criticism notes how this Other is distanced from *us* by being excluded from contemporaneous or coeval presence with 'us'. The skewing of temporality involves a chronotope that preserves the spatialized and temporal boundaries between sociocultural worlds and people who are in fact interconnected. Indeed, it requires denying or repressing the actual history of power, relationships, and commerce that resulted in collecting the objects in the first place. Are not such connections necessary for Westerners to have gotten the objects? And is their suppression necessary to the functioning of the category 'primitive art'?

For the purpose of the 'primitivist' alterity to modernity, such representations were valued for their contrast with the modern self-conscious, dynamism and challenge of conventions typical of Western society and Western art history. But for collectors of 'primitive art', this purity, association with ritual, and distance from Western influence are precisely the sources of value. Thus, the valorized 'primitive' usable in critique is nonetheless presumed to be ahistorical, timeless, unchanging, authorless. These qualities seem necessary to preserve the capacity of this formation to provide an alterity from the West. On the one hand, 'primitive art' is authentic, expressive of the truly different Other, only when it originates outside of Western contact, in a precolonial past. On the other hand, such modes of exhibition efface the specific histories and power relations through which non-Western objects became part of Western collections, available to display. Indeed, they typically exclude the contemporary representatives of these cultural traditions as 'inauthentic'.

Yet, as the critique of deconstruction provides in one way, these very meanings are also available in the presence of the objects and their exhibition – and they provide evidence of the cultural work (through recontextualization itself) in which objects have often been deployed – of remembering, forgetting, dismembering, obviating, and displacing histories and relationships. This is what Keane (2005) means in calling for attention to causality, attention to 'what things make possible' and not just what they 'mean'. At the same time, this quality has led to exhibitions – such as the one on Stewart Culin, an important collector of Native American art for the Brooklyn Museum – that place the objects of 'primitive art' precisely within the interconnections of their collection and display (Fane 1991) and also for analysis to relate the construction of exhibitions to

contradictions that, while general, are more specific and distinctive in the historical and geographical relationships mediated (Coombes 2001).

The debates themselves had a startling effect on anthropologists. For decades, after all, anthropologists and others had labored for official acceptance of non-Western visual arts and aesthetics as serious and deserving objects of consideration in the modernist canon of visual culture. Then, just when it appeared that so-called 'tribal art' was being recognized as having affinity with the work of the recognized geniuses of modern art, art critics pulled the rug from under the enterprise. Even more embarrassingly, perhaps, they did so on grounds that anthropologists ought to have anticipated: namely the inapplicability of the Modernist, formal concept of 'art' itself as a universal, interpretive, and evaluative category.

In this way, there has been a deconstruction both of the category 'art' and of 'primitive art' that is perfectly summarized in Clifford's influential review in the following comments:

the MOMA exhibition documents a *taxonomic* moment: the status of non-Western objects and 'high' art are importantly redefined, but there is nothing permanent or transcendent about the categories at stake. The appreciation and interpretation of tribal objects takes place within a modern 'system of objects' which confers value on certain things and withholds it from others (Baudrillard 1968). Modernist primitivism, with its claims to deeper humanist sympathies and a wider aesthetic sense, goes hand-in-hand with a developed market in tribal art and with definitions of artistic and cultural authenticity that are now widely contested.

(Clifford 1988: 198)

For many, this debate about 'the primitive' was principally a debate about Modernism and modernity, against Modernism's claim to universality and the insistent identification of art with formal, artistic invention. The debates have demonstrated the extent to which non-Western practices – or more often the extractable products of those practices – have become of theoretical significance for the massive and critical debates within the art world itself concerning aesthetics and cultural politics (Foster 1983; Lippard 1991; and see Michaels 1987). But this is not the only significance of the debates, because – fittingly enough in a world of globalization and boundary breakdown – the exhibition and debates provided an occasion for those cast into the 'primitive' category to protest and resist the ideological and practical effects of this representations.

UNIVERSAL ART PROCESSES?

These critical concerns about modernity and difference, constitutive in one sense of the meanings given to 'primitive art', have fit very uncomfortably with the concomitant debates about the question of a cross-cultural and universal aesthetics as constituted in the disciplinary concerns of Anthropology. The ambivalence about comparison is of long standing in anthropology, but as suggested above, despite their *relativistic* suspicion of Western art theory's universality, anthropologists gave little *explicit* attention to the power of cultural hierarchy as an important component in the functioning of difference.¹¹

While known for his 'historical particularism' and insistence on relativism, the 'father of American anthropology' and author of the seminal volume *Primitive Art* (1927), Franz Boas himself wrote that there is a common set of processes in art:

The treatment given to the subject [primitive art] is based on two principles that I believe should guide all investigations into the manifestations of life among primitive people: the one the fundamental sameness of mental processes in all races and in all cultural forms of the present day; the other, the consideration of every cultural phenomenon as the result of historical happenings.

... So far as my personal experience goes and so far as I feel competent to judge ethnographical data on the basis of this experience, the mental processes of man are the same everywhere, regardless of race and culture, and regardless of the apparent absurdity of beliefs and customs.

(Boas 1927: 1)

Brilliantly in this volume, Boas attempted to demonstrate technical virtuosity – emphasizing, thus, the materiality both of the worker's body and of the object on which it works – as the vital core of 'primitive art' and art more generally. By 1938, however, Joseph Campbell notes, similar passages were removed from Boas's (1938) updated *The Mind of Primitive Man*: 'a tendency to emphasize the differentiating traits of primitive societies had meanwhile developed to such a degree that any mention by an author of common traits simply meant that he had not kept up with the fashion' (1969: 20).

It is not surprising that another component of the 'primitivism' critiques,¹² the discussions of aesthetic universality connected to the doctrine of Formalist Modernism, has cut across the older tradition of 'tribal art' studies that insisted at times simultaneously on (1) the existence of 'art'

in all cultures and (2) their differences. This has been an area of ambivalence in the anthropology of art, sustained by an inadequate reflexive consideration of Western concepts of art (see Myers and Marcus 1995) and by the segregation of the market for non-Western objects from the larger debates. I don't mean to say that collectors of 'primitive art' were unaware of stylistic traditions and variations. (Indeed, some of them think they are collecting 'masterpieces'.) However, the participation of collectors in the discourse of 'authenticity' and 'purity' relates to the ideological functioning of the category 'primitive art' at another level – one in which the underlying forms of expression, psyche, and motivation are essentially one.

There are intrinsic contradictions here, and the emerging line of cleavage only reinforces the sense of the category's instability and involvement in ideological regulation. By 'instability' I seek to draw attention to conflation. The anthropological sense of difference is incorporated in concerns about cultural relativism; while concerned to grant some kind of equality or equivalence among cultural formulations, it does not address the difference among cultures in the same way as the postmodern suspicion of purported formal relationships between so-called 'primitive' and 'modern' artists. The postmodern concern is to draw attention to the existence of dominant Western cultural forms as *cultural*, rather than just natural and universal. They deride the effacement of what must be incommensurable differences in attempts at 'humanizing' or 'familiarizing' the foreign in terms of the dominant norm. They are further concerned with the way in which art theory has tended to denying the value of popular art practice and popular culture, in so far as they might differ from what Modernism presented as central and most valued. Skeptical of the strategy of 'humanism', Clifford (1988) – and in different ways Marianna Torgovnick (1990) – drew attention to these very tendencies in projects of comparison in distinguishing a humanistic ethnography of 'familiarization' (that finds similarities between them and us, but in our terms) from a surrealist one that 'subverts' or 'disrupts' the all-too-familiar categories.¹³ He called, famously, for attention to objects that are 'indigestible' by our own categories, especially 'hybrid objects', challenging to the frameworks of Western culture in ways resonant with the historical avant-garde.

The primitivism debates allow us to recognize that the doctrines that view art as autonomous from other domains of social life are not 'theories' external to their object (see Myers and

Marcus 1995; Myers 2002). As 'ethnotheories' these doctrines would be cultural products and linked organically to the same processes of modernization they seem to oppose. Just as 'antimodernism' has been identified by Jackson Lears (1983) as protesting 'modernity' and therefore part of it, so 'primitivism' is intrinsically connected to 'modernity' and 'Modernism'.

'MODERN ART'

The foregoing implies that the relationality of the category 'primitive art' finds its location within the changing meanings and valence of the category 'art' itself in the Western tradition. For many people engaged with the arts, 'art' remains a commonsense category of just this sort; and there is held to be something essential about these practices in terms of their value, their relation to the human psyche or creativity or spirituality. This has not, however, been merely a fact of art's universality, and social historians of art have pursued this strangeness, the particularity of Western art's own self-construction, from *within* the tradition. The research of Kristeller, Williams, and others (Baxandall 1972; Eagleton 1990) has pointed to the distinctiveness of this 'modern' notion of art, one in which quite distinct kinds of activity have come to be constructed (or recognized) as *separated from other cultural activity* and having something in common as 'art'. They have attempted to understand the transformations of European social life that led to the condition for our (Western) particular experience of an 'aesthetic dimension'.

The work of historians, no less than that of anthropologists and critics, has offered a challenge to the universality of the concepts of art and aesthetics familiar to Modernism. Raymond Williams (1977) famously outlined the changing meaning of the concept 'art', and its place in the history of industrialization (see also Baxandall 1972). From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, Williams pointed out, the concept changed from a reference to 'general skill' to one of a distinct sphere of cultural, aesthetic activity (a sphere distinguished by its combination of arts into art and by its transcendence of the instrumental, the merely material and mere bodily pleasure). Indeed, the Renaissance historian Kristeller somewhat earlier noted that there was no concept of 'art' that embraced the quite distinct forms of painting, music, sculpture, theater, and dance:

We have to admit the conclusion, distasteful to many historians of aesthetics but grudgingly admitted by most of them, that ancient writers and thinkers, though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious, and practical function or content, or to use an aesthetic quality as a standard for grouping the fine arts together or for making them the subject of a comprehensive philosophical interpretation.

(Kristeller 1951/1965: 174)

In considering what is called 'modernity', historians have explored what is involved in the binary constructions of 'primitive art'. The consideration of 'modernity' stresses the general context of institutional separation of distinct and abstract areas of interest – of kinship, politics, religion, economics, and art – taking place in the rise of capitalism's development, a line pioneered by Max Weber, or in the rise of the nation state (Eagleton 1990). There may not be much agreement about the timing of these developments as well as the definitive characterization of the separation, but most theorists agree that there is an important difference between art and these other domains, in that – as Daniel Miller sums it up, '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 that problem' (Miller 1991: 52, my emphasis). In contrast, surely, the anthropological emphasis on the *social* embeddedness of art practices in so-called 'traditional societies' is not a matter of simple difference but ends up constituting by contrast the distinctiveness of 'modern art' – in which the separation of an aesthetic sphere was constitutive of art and aesthetics as a particular mode of evaluating, or interrogating, cultural activity and its value.

The questions of mass culture and mass consumption, as well as the question of cultural heterogeneity (high and low culture, fine art and popular or folk) are central questions addressed by modern ideologies of art. A hierarchy of discriminating value is organized through what is claimed to be a universalizing, interest-free judgment. What might be called 'modernisms', therefore, can be seen to develop in relation to the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe and the revolution in France in 1848 – a condition in which art comprises an arena in which discourses about cultural value are produced. Thus, modernization is the basis of 'modernism' – an ideology that engages with the conditions of the former. It is this dimension

of 'modern art' – its complex and critical relationship to the concomitant 'modern' and emerging dominance of rational utility and money as the basis of all value – that has often shared with 'primitive art' an oppositional stance to the rational side of modernity. It is in this way that 'primitive art' has been able to operate as a basis for 'modern art'.¹⁴

Recruited in this way to the ideological project of 'modern art', a project built around the autonomy of art as a sphere of distinct experience, the resulting constructions of 'primitivism' were inevitably oriented to the concerns of those who used them. The relatively common view, therefore, that high art takes transcendence of the fragmented, dislocated nature of contemporary life in the industrial era as a central concern (see Miller 1991: 52) defines a 'primitive art' that functions as evidence of the existence of forms of humanity which are integral, cohesive, working as a totality. Such meanings do not simply provide the critical opposite to such an experienced world; rather 'primitive art' and its represented reality also permits the very characterization of the 'modern' as fragmented and a sense of contemporary mass culture as 'spurious' and somehow 'inauthentic'.

It should be clear that the signifying locations of 'primitive art' have varied with the particular narrative of 'loss' presumed to have occurred with modern life. But these signifying practices seem always to involve repressing or suppressing part of the phenomenon. If, in a certain sense, 'primitive art' supposes traditionalism – which violates avant-garde requirements for originality and self-creation – this opposition has had to be repressed to capture the organic opposite for modern fragmentation.

Thus, figures such as the 'primitive', the 'exotic', or the 'tribal' have offered a basis for challenging Western categories by defining 'difference', but they have done so principally, it would appear, *within* the ideological function of Western cultural systems. And it was this function – the continued support of the dominant Western cultural system that in fact might limit and misrepresent the works and meanings of non-Western practitioners – which postmodern theorists recognized and sought to disrupt.

The tropes of 'primitive art' continued to exercise considerable rhetorical power towards the end of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by the much publicized Parisian exhibition 'Les 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 1994), and by the critical

responses to Aboriginal acrylic painting (Myers 1991, 2002).

PRIMITIVISM STILL

To conclude this chapter, I will remark on the opportunities I have had to see this myself, in writing about the representation of Aboriginal culture in the critical responses to an exhibition of Aboriginal acrylic paintings at the Asia Society in 1988, and to trace briefly some of the trajectories set in motion by the critiques.

In the responses to the exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Asia Society, I found (Myers 1991) that several evaluations suggested that the acrylics offer a glimpse of the spiritual wholeness lost, variously, to 'Western art', to 'Western man', or to 'modernity'. The well known Australian art critic Robert Hughes indulged precisely in the form of nostalgic primitivism, praising the exhibition lavishly in *Time* magazine and drawing precisely on this opposition:

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)

In Hughes's estimation, their 'otherness' occupies a world without much in common with ours; the artistic values of individual creativity and freedom are not relevant. But this otherness, he maintained, was itself meaningful for us. Another line of evaluation asked if they could be viewed as a conceptual return to our lost ('primitive') selves, as suggested in the subtitle of another review: 'Aboriginal art as a kind of cosmic road map to the primeval' (Wallach 1989).

The conventions of their differences were also seen as morally instructive about some of our own associations, especially of our materialism. In his travels to Australia during the planning of the exhibition, Andrew Pekarik (then Director of the Asia Society Gallery) was reported as saying 'that these people with practically zero material culture have one of the most complex social and intellectual cultures of any society' (in Cazdow 1987: 9). In this Romantic – and Durkheimian – construction, a critique of Modernity, the paintings may represent the worthiness of Aboriginal survival and, consequently, the dilemma and indictment of

modern Australia's history and treatment of their forebears as less than human.

POSITIONS FOR SIGNIFYING THE PRIMITIVE

The construction of 'primitivism' has a particular salience for the production and circulation of political and cultural identities. At the same time, recent work argues that 'primitivism' must be studied in its particular contexts, and it is increasingly realized that there is not a generic 'primitivism'. Nicholas Thomas (1999), for example, has written about the distinctive qualities of 'settler primitivism', which should be distinguished from other operations of the trope. One might note, for example, the importance of World War I – in the United States, Canada, and Australia – in leading these settler nations to pursue more actively an identity distinct from that of Europe, the role this played in the development of interest in 'primitive art', and the appropriation of each country's indigenous arts as part of the national cultural patrimony (see especially Mullin 1995).¹⁵ Often, the effort to escape the anxiety of European influence and to express a unique experience has resulted in an appropriation of the 'native', the 'indigene', as a component of an authentic national culture, exhibited, sold, and collected in museums and markets of 'primitive art'. Objects marked as 'art' are not the only material for such cultural production, but their portability and circulability may allow such objects to bear special weight in these desires. The workings here seem to differ from the ideological function of 'primitivism' in the MOMA exhibition of 1984, which was concerned with making the Other legitimate the cosmopolitan Western (not national) construction of 'art' in its most essential form, as formal and creative, as a basic human impulse. In processes of nation building, a central activity of modernization, distinctive values may be imputed to the 'native'. Appropriation by nationalist culture represents different temporal and spatial juxtapositions. This occurs both by regional transposition and also by class and gendered positioning – but it is within this range of the ideological organization of 'difference' that 'primitivism' and modern art coincide.

Thus, suspicion about the uses of 'primitivism' has not been aimed only at the supposedly transcendent, autonomous aesthetic domain postulated by High Modernism. It has equally significant implications, however, for

the way in which local identities might lose their integrity or have their distinctiveness subsumed within a grand narrative that does not engage *their* own histories. This may well be a problem of art at the periphery of the world system. Thus, the exhibitions of what were called 'Primitive Art,' while they emphasize form – in being displayed on the usual white walls without much information other than general date and probable 'tribal identity' – denied to these works the history and authorship which would be part of the Western context (see Price 1989).

For Aboriginal Australian and First Nation people in North America, 'primitivism' has a particular salience for the production and circulation of political and cultural identities (see Ziff and Rao 1997). Ames (1992), Clifford (1988, 1991) and some of the essayists in Karp and Lavine (1991) have eloquently made this point about museums particularly. But they do so in recognition of the active political projects of indigenous people and their representatives – in the practices of artists and curators such as Jimmy Durham, Jolene Rickard, Gerald McMaster, Fiona Foley, Brenda Croft, Tracey Moffatt, Paul Chaat Smith, and others – who reject the binding restrictions of 'authenticity' and cultural purity with their own insistence that 'We are not dead, nor less ['Indian', 'Aboriginal', etc.].' The fundamental rejection of the category 'primitive art' surely takes place in the creation of their own museums by indigenous communities in North America, Australia, and elsewhere – in museums such as the newly opened, indigenously curated and managed National Museum of the American Indian, twenty years old as an indigenous institution. Indigenous people are also, increasingly, reclaiming the objects made by their ancestors, through legislation relating to cultural property concerns such as the US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (passed in 1990) or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act of 1984. In reclaiming objects, indigenous people resituate the objects in *their* own histories, constructing a narrative of their presence and continued existence as part of a world that may include other cultures but also constituting themselves as a people through their claim. Indeed, the materiality of these objects enables their repatriation and history to be part of their continued presence. In July 2004, for example, under Aboriginal heritage protection laws, an Indigenous Australian group, the Dja Dja Wurrung, created a huge controversy in seizing some 150 year old artifacts that had been on loan from the British Museum to an exhibition in Melbourne at Museum Victoria. The

contestation over this case exemplifies the collision of two different regimes of value, in which the values created by different forms of exchange – one in the market dominated by the West and the other in cosmological regimes of indigenous claims – are engaged in a ‘tournament of values’ (Appadurai 1986) fundamentally set in motion by an insistence on coeval presence.

THE INTERCULTURAL FIELD

Where are the ‘natives’, one must ask, in the primitivism debates, and why do they seem to be erased by the language of ‘appropriation’? To be sure, the recognition that non-Western peoples ‘had art’ did result – and not inconsequentially – in their inclusion in the authorized ‘Family of Man’. They were ‘creative’, ‘humane’, ‘spiritual’. But the exhibitions promoting this inclusion – and the success of the intensified circulation of the products and images of non-Western Others – comprise a complex for recontextualizing objects that offers opportunities for varying engagement. In this sense, they are sites of ongoing cultural production (Bourdieu 1993), and it is important to understand them in this way.

I wish to draw on the analytic framework of ‘recontextualization’ first offered by Nicholas Thomas (1991; see also Myers 2001). It offers an opportunity for some suggestions beyond those imagined in the first round of Primitivism debates, suggestions more in keeping with the renewed approach to considerations of materiality (see Gell 1998; Miller 2005). It suggests that a larger frame for grasping ‘primitivism’ lies in the notion of intercultural exchange and transaction. This is a frame that can include the sort of ‘appropriations’ that have concerned critics, but the weight is placed not on the boundaries but on the charged social field that encompasses the actors. An emphasis on ‘appropriation’ and the primitivizing ‘gaze’ is not sufficient to understand what happens materially when such objects circulate into an international art world. Scholars such as Howard Morphy (1992), Ruth Phillips (1998), Richard and Sally Price (1999), Chris Steiner (1994), Nelson Graburn (2004), Charlene Townsend-Gault (2004) and I (among others) have asked what actually *does* happen in circulation, at the sites of exhibition – to ask how objects, identities, and discourses are produced, inflected, and invoked in *actual institutional settings*. These ‘fields of cultural production’ (Bourdieu

1993) have distinctive histories, purposes, and structures of their own.¹⁶

Further, this approach redresses one of the principal assumptions of ‘primitivism’, namely the temporal boundary that considered these cultures to be over, lacking a future, an assumption underlying the typical lack of concern to include the voices or actual subjectivities of those from these traditions.¹⁷ In the Sotheby’s auction, with which I began this chapter, the indigenous ‘traditional owners’ of the *churinga* attempted to bring it back – with the additional agency of the Central Land Council and the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs – through purchase, and thereby to remove it from the realm of art commodity and replace it within their own tradition. Although they failed in the attempt, because the price exceeded the resources provided by the Australian government, the activation of their agency did succeed in redefining the social field and challenging the once easy placement of such objects within the domain of ‘primitive art’. Even at the MOMA exhibition the indexical relationships of beautiful objects to their makers and heirs became a basis for the extension of ‘native’ agency: the so-called Zuni war god figures were withdrawn from the show when MOMA ‘was informed by knowledgeable authorities that Zuni people consider any public exhibition of their war gods to be sacrilegious’ (quoted in Clifford 1988: 209). As Clifford notes, this event shows that ‘living traditions have claims on them’ (*ibid.*), and a range of recent repatriation claims have made this process increasingly visible.

It is just such an ‘Outward Clash’ – as Peirce calls it (Keane 2005) – that forces us to attend to the broader materiality involved in such objects. In museums around the world, what was ‘primitive art’ is being resignified, reclaimed, re-exhibited as the patrimony of particular communities or peoples – bearing the trace, as well, of its history of ‘collection’ or ‘alienation’ (see Ames 1992; Clifford 1991; Cranmer Webster 1992; Saunders 1997; Kramer 2004). Research and writing on the nation and the native offer considerable insight into the problem.

In pursuit of this sort of specificity, it is clearly necessary to break down the very general notion of the ‘primitive’ that has tended to be deployed in analyses. In part, this involves recognizing that the processes of modernization are mediated through a range of distinctive institutions. Thus, scholars must continue to track the figure of the ‘Indigenous Other’ through the distinctive circuits of artistic, regional, and national institutions and identity,

showing different mediations through time and place (Bakewell 1995; Cohodas 1999; Mullin 1995; Myers 2002; Phillips 1998; Thomas 1999).

There has been a *general* context for revaluing indigenous people and their products in the English-speaking settler states. It has often been noted that the recuperation of the indigenous culture in such appropriations may, however, value them only in ways defined by the dominant culture – that is, in terms of a hegemony that does not really accept 'difference' or that organizes difference in the service of another set of values. This is the effect of the effort at appropriation of the indigenous – the Indio – by Mexican fine arts in the service of the revolution's ideology of hybridization (Bakewell 1995); for such work to be 'fine art', however, it could not be made by those regarded as artisans – and certainly not by Indios themselves. Similarly, the resignifications of the Australian Aboriginal relationship to land embodied in their paintings may be resisted within the immediate region where they live (whose settlers compete for control of the land) or by immigrant minorities (who are threatened by a special Aboriginal status), but have a different meaning when they are 're-placed' in the context of emerging Australian nationalism, international tourism, and the new professional class that seeks to define itself.

However, while Aboriginal producers of the paintings – living in dilapidated and impoverished communities – may be stripped of their historical specificity and their images converted to signifiers in Australian national myth, their insistence on a return of value for their paintings also resists this incorporation. Objects lend themselves to recontextualization for an unlimited range of ideological purposes, an infinite number of desires, and so-called 'natives' appropriate, too – not just commodities and signifiers, but even the idea of art itself! The claim to be making 'art' – contemporary art – is a vital strand of the recent movement of acrylic painting and other forms of Indigenous expression in Australia, and significant parallels are clear in Canada – with Northwest Coast art (see Ames 1992) – and in the United States (Lippard 1991).

As a final comment, in recognition of the potentials of these interventions, I would like to reiterate what I have argued elsewhere (Myers 2001), therefore, that the language of 'objectification' – beyond the one-sided framework of 'appropriation' – may provide greater leverage in teasing out the complicated and subtle intersections of relative value and interests. If the appropriations of Aboriginal painting or

decoration are objectifications of national identity, they are also objectifications of their Aboriginal makers, and we need to follow out the implications of their movement through a new system of value. In this movement, the media in which these objectifications occurred are a problem to be considered. Painting, sculpture, and dance may move very differently. But at the same time, we are forced to recognize that works of Aboriginal 'art' index their makers and their production history, even if the structure of an exhibition suppresses this by labels that present only tribe and century. Questions about the objects and how they got there are potentially present in any exhibition. Recent exhibitions – like 'Pomo Indian Basket Weavers: their Baskets and the Art Market' (organized by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and shown at venues like the NMAI, Gustav Heye Center in Manhattan in 1999) and the earlier 'Objects of Myth and Memory: American Indian Art at the Brooklyn Museum' (1991) that focused on the curator Stewart Culin's collecting – have reclaimed these histories and personages, and the networks linking, for example, basket makers in California and collectors in the Northeast through the display of baskets.¹⁸

Moreover, the objectifications of national identity are both variable and contextually limited in their stability. Aboriginal art's status as a commodity of consumption involves forms of commercial value that are potentially at odds with its capacity to articulate – as something spiritual, authentic, and attached to the land – national identity. It was nothing short of a scandal, then, when an Aboriginal bark painting in the Prime Minister's collection was discovered to be a forgery, painted by a white person! Furthermore, these paintings – and art itself – are not the only media in which national identity may be objectified. War memorials, automobiles, heritage sites, archeological formations, heroes, battlefields, natural history museums, symphony orchestras, and so on may offer very different – even competing – representations of the national self, representations that may circulate within different contexts and social formations.

These constitute the very different implications of what Thomas (1999) calls 'settler primitivism' from a more general primitivism such as that represented in European modernist art. The whole significance of settler primitivism is that the 'native' and the 'settler' are coeval. In this sense, settler primitivism depends on another contingency of the materiality of things – their spatial contiguity. The instabilities and the

tensions come from the fact that indigenous communities are not only contemporaneous but also to some extent recognizably in the same space with so-called modern ones. While it draws on many tropes that are familiar, settler primitivism has a distinctive problem of context: the indigenous people cannot be fully relegated to prehistory as the predecessors of the settlers. There is a basic situation of copresence, even competing claims in the land. The logic of the more general primitivism – through which African cultural products were conveyed – differs in this regard, and is mediated through the constructions of the nation and national cultures in postcolonial states.

These recontextualizations – in this case of a hybrid formation of settler primitivism – are not just surprising or ironic juxtapositions, but reorganizations of *value*. The gain in value for native cultural forms should be conceptualized in terms that are relevant for anthropological theory more generally, and indeed such recontextualizations are increasingly common in the world.

NOTES

- 1 Gombrich wrote of 'the preference for the primitive' as having as early an appearance as the quotation he takes from Cicero, and sees it as an occasional and temporary rejection or disgust for the refined and the trajectory of mimesis.
- 2 Two other important collections have followed on the initial burst of interest in the primitivism debates – Karp and Lavine (1991) and Phillips and Steiner (1999).
- 3 A great exception to this preference for the pure exotic, of course, is Julius Lips's (1937) *The Savage Hits Back*, while a more recent foray into such matters was Enid Schildkrout's and Charles Keims's exhibition of Mangbetu art (see Schildkrout and Keim 1990).
- 4 A further development of these discussions emanated in the wake of 'Les Magiciens de la terre,' an exhibition in Paris that attempted to transcend some of the difficulties faced by MOMA.
- 5 The Museum of Modern Art's approach is set forth in Alfred Barr's work. MOMA had considerable influence on the recognition of 'primitive art' as *art* through a series of exhibitions organized especially by René d'Harnoncourt. In 1936 he was appointed an administrator in the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, part of the Department of the Interior. D'Harnoncourt mounted one of the first national exhibitions of Native American arts at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco in 1939. D'Harnoncourt was responsible for other exhibitions of African art and that of North American Indians. In addition to being curator and later Director of MOMA, d'Harnoncourt also served as art advisor to Nelson Rockefeller's art collection and was vice-president for Rockefeller's Museum of Primitive Art from its beginning in 1957. D'Harnoncourt was closely involved with one of the major academic scholars of primitive art, Paul Wingert. Some important discussion of d'Harnoncourt can be found in Rushing (1995).
- 6 As Torgovnick writes of the critic Roger Fry, there was a great concern to 'rescue art from the morass of photographic representation and narrative' (1990: 87). Fry was one of the early critical enthusiasts for what he called 'Negro Art' (Fry 1920). The rise of photography and its greater capacity for naturalistic representation is commonly perceived as creating a crisis for 'art' and a need to 'make it new' by theorizing a distinctive function for it. If one account of Modernism and 'Primitivism' can be traced through the collection and exhibition of African and Oceanic art, as Rubin (1984) does and which Torgovnick follows, another account is traced by W. Jackson Rushing's (1995) *Native American Art and the New York Avant-garde* and his depiction of the unique critical contexts established in the United States in relation to Native American cultural products. The edited collection, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: a Documentary History* (Flam and Deutch 2003), provides many of the central documents for a history of primitivism and its controversies as well as a comprehensive chronology of exhibitions, publications, and events.
- 7 In *Primitivism in Modern Art*, published in 1938, Goldwater pointed to the important precedent set for much modern European art by the forms of children's drawings and other kinds of so-called primitive art, as well as by artists' ideas about the nature of the creative process which lay behind those forms.
- 8 Such typological resemblance was what Boasian anthropologists once described as 'convergence' or forms of independent invention, although they functioned in the

- exhibition to indicate the universality of the interest in form. For discussions of the 'comparative method' and debates about it, see Harris (1968) and Lowie (1937).
- 9 In this regard, there is still some ambiguity in anthropological concerns about context, which – art-oriented scholars have maintained – tend to subsume the material object to cultural meanings, claiming to see something *beyond* the object in itself.
 - 10 In this form, the identification of the primitive with directness and expression could be mobilized to an avant-garde position that Gombrich delineates in Zola's review of Manet's 'Olympia', in 'Mon salon', in which he says he asks an artist to do more than provide mere 'beauty': 'It is no longer a question here, therefore, of pleasing or of not pleasing, it is a question of being oneself, of baring one's breast ... The word 'art' displeases me. It contains, I do not know what, in the way of ideas of necessary compromises, of absolute ideals ... that which I seek above all in a painting is a man, and not a picture ... You must abandon yourself bravely to your nature and not seek to deny it' (Gombrich 2002: 206).
 - 11 Miller has insisted, for example, that the claim of art as a transcendent realm was not something really taken seriously by anthropologists (see Miller 1991 and below), whose studies have tended to emphasize the embedding of aesthetics *in* everyday life (e.g., Witherspoon 1977). 'The separation and definition of art and aesthetics as something different and particular,' as Miller calls it (1991: 51), is rare in the world's cultures. Much anthropological ink was spilled in demonstrating the functional involvement of supposedly artistic forms – masks, sculpture – in political and religious activities, against an expectation of art for art's sake. At the same time, there were surely few anthropologists who wanted to claim that the communities they studied 'lacked art', since something unself-consciously called 'art' remained the *sine qua non* of human status. Consequently, an anthropologist encounters the category of 'art' with suspicion and a sense of its 'strangeness'. Indeed, for most anthropologists, the concept of 'art' would be, as it is for Miller (1991: 50), 'subject to the critique of relativism, in that it stems from an essentialist foundation – that is, no absolute quality of the world – but has become an established perspective through particular cultural and historical conditions'.
 - 12 See Dutton's 1991 review of Price (1989) as well as the Manchester debates on aesthetics (Ingold 1997).
 - 13 In an excellent essay, Eric Michaels (1987) – no doubt sick of the repeated treatment of Aboriginal painters as 'so many Picassos in the desert' – argued that the practices of Aboriginal acrylic painting had more to offer postmodern art theory than that of Modernism. I cannot resist pointing out how these tendencies themselves draw precisely on the tropes of the historical avant-garde to tear away the familiar and to reveal, thereby, the world. An elegant example of this is to be found in Tony Bennett's (1979) discussion of 'estrangement' and 'defamiliarization' in Russian Formalism.
 - 14 One must acknowledge that historians disagree in how they understand the emergence of such a set of discursive practices – with art as healing and the artist as heroic individual.
 - 15 While I want to stress the development of an interest in and market for 'primitive art' here, I do not mean to say that this was the first time in which the settler societies appropriated their country's indigenous arts for the production of national identity. In the United States, this clearly occurred in periods earlier than World War I, although something distinctive does happen then.
 - 16 I am indebted to Webb Keane for the reminder here that part of the value of Nicholas Thomas's (1991) book, *Entangled Objects*, rests in his effort to look in both directions, at Pacific peoples' recontextualizations of Western cultural objects. Obviously, this is not a level political playing field. At the same time, however, it is not a peculiarity of the West to resignify things.
 - 17 Douglas Cole (1985), for example, describes a period of rapid accumulation around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, justified in so far as Native cultures were thought to be vanishing. Others have insisted on the importance of Western custodianship of objects neglected or no longer of value in their 'home' cultures. These frameworks underlie the neglect of the possible attachment of these objects to living people.
 - 18 The marvelous writing of Marvin Cohodas (1997) and Sally McLendon (1993, 1998) are exemplary of the work on collecting that has transformed the thinking about 'primitive art'.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Teodor (1970/1983) *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Ames, Michael M. (1992) *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: the Anthropology of Museums*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Anderson, Richard (1989) *Art in Small-scale Societies*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1986) 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–63.
- Bakewell, Liza (1995) 'Bellas artes and artes populares: the implications of difference in the Mexico City art world', in B. Bright and L. Bakewell (eds), *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, pp. 19–54.
- Barthes, Roland (1957) *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1968) *Le Système des objets*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Baxandall, Michael (1972) *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: a Primer in the Social History of a Pictorial Style*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bennett, Tony (1979) *Formalism and Marxism*. London: Methuen.
- Blake, Nigel and Frascina, Francis 1993 'Modern practices of art and modernity', in F. Frascina, N. Blake, B. Fer, T. Garb and C. Harrison (eds), *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, pp. 50–140.
- Boas, Franz (1927) *Primitive Art*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Boas, Franz (1938) *The Mind of Primitive Man*, rev. edn. New York: Macmillan.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Buchloh, Benjamin J. (1989) 'The Whole Earth Show: an interview with Jean-Hubert Martin', *Art in America*, 77 (May): 150–9, 211, 213.
- Campbell, Joseph (1969) 'Primitive Man as Metaphysician', in Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Primitive Views of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 20–32.
- Cazdow, Jane (1987) 'The art of desert dreaming', *Australian Weekend Magazine*, 8–9 August, pp. 6–9.
- Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Ethnography, Literature, Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James (1991) 'Four northwest coast museums: travel reflections', in I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, pp. 212–54.
- Cohodas, Marvin (1997) *Basket Weavers for the Curio Trade: Elizabeth and Louise Hickox*. Tucson, AZ and Los Angeles: University of Arizona Press/Southwest Museum.
- Cohodas, Marvin (1999) 'Elizabeth Hickox and Karuk Basketry: a case study of debates on innovation and paradigms of authenticity', in R. Phillips and C. Steiner (eds), *Unpacking Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 143–61.
- Cole, Douglas (1985) *Captured Heritage: the Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Connelly, Frances (1995) *The Sleep of Reason*. College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Connor, Steven (1989) *Postmodernist Culture: an Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Coombes, Annie, E. (2001) 'The object of translation: notes on 'Art' and antonymy in a postcolonial context', in F. Myers (ed.) *The Empire of Things*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 233–56.
- Cranmer Webster, Gloria (1992) 'From colonization to repatriation', in Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (eds), *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.
- Danto, Arthur (1986) *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- D'Azevedo, Warren L., ed. (1973) *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Diamond, Stanley (1969) 'Introduction: the Uses of the primitive', in Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Primitive Views of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. v–xxix.
- Dutton, Dennis (1991) 'Sally Price on primitive art', *Philosophy and Literature*, 15: 382–7.
- Eagleton, Terry (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. New York: Blackwell.
- Eliade, Mircea (1959) *Cosmos and History: the Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper Torchbook.
- Errington, Shelley 1998 *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and other Tales of Progress*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fabian, Johannes (1983) *Time and the Other*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fane, Diana (1991) *Objects of Myth and memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Flam, Jack and Deutch, Miriam, eds (2003) *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: a Documentary History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Foster, Hal, ed. (1983) *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press.
- Foster, Hal (1985) 'The "primitive" unconscious of modern art, or, White skin, black masks', in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Fried, Michael 1967 'Art and objecthood', *Artforum* 5 (summer): 12–23.

- Fry, Roger (1920) 'Negro sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club', *Athenaeum*, 94 (16 April): 516. Repr. in *Vision and Design*. New York: Brentano's.
- Gell, Alfred (1998) *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Goldwater, Robert (1938) *Primitivism in Modern Art*. New York: Random House.
- Gombrich, Ernst (2002) *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*. New York: Phaidon Press.
- Graburn, Nelson (2004) 'Authentic Inuit art: creation and inclusion in the Canadian north', *Journal of Material Culture* 9 (2): 141–59.
- Greenberg, Clement (1939/1961) 'Avant-garde and kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, pp. 3–21.
- Greenberg, Clement (1965) 'Modernist painting', *Art and Literature*, 4 (spring): 193–201.
- Guilbaut, Serge (1983) *How New York stole the Idea of Abstract Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. A. Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, Marvin (1968) *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hughes, Robert (1988) 'Evoking the spirit ancestors', *Time*, 31 October, pp. 79–80.
- Ingold, Tim, ed. (1997) *Key Debates in Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- Jopling, Carole F., ed. (1971) *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies: a Critical Anthology*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Stephen D. (1991) *Exhibiting Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Keane, Webb (2005) 'Signs are not the clothes or meaning: on the social analysis of material things', in D. Miller (ed.), *Materiality*. Durham, NC: University of Durham Press.
- Kramer, Jennifer (2004) 'Figurative repatriation', *Journal of material culture*, 9: 161–82.
- Kristeller, Paul (1951/1965) 'The modern system of the arts', in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lears, T.J. Jackson (1983) *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lippard, Lucy (1991) *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon.
- Lips, Julius (1937/1966) *The Savage Hits Back*, trans. Vincent Benson. New Hyde Park: University Books.
- Lovejoy, Arthur and Boas, George (1935) *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lowie, Robert (1937) *The History of Ethnological Theory*. New York: Holt Rinehart.
- McEvilley, Thomas (1984) 'Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief', *Artforum*, 23 (3): 54–60.
- McLendon, Sally (1993) 'Collecting Pomoan baskets, 1889–1939', *Museum Anthropology*, 17 (2): 49–60.
- McLendon, Sally (1998) 'Pomo basket weaves in the University of Pennsylvania Museum collections', *Expedition*, 40 (1): 34–47.
- Michaels, Eric (1987) 'Western Desert sand painting and postmodernism', in *Yuendumu Doors. Warlukurlangu Artists* (eds). Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, pp. 135–143.
- Miller, Daniel (1991) 'The necessity of the primitive in modern art', in S. Hiller (ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*. New York: Routledge, pp. 50–71.
- Miller, Daniel (2005) 'Materiality: an introduction', in D. Miller (ed.) *Materiality*. Durham, NC: Duck University Press.
- Morphy, Howard (1992) *Ancestral Connections*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mullin, Molly (1995) 'The patronage of difference: making Indian art' art, not ethnology', in G. Marcus and F. Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Anthropology and Art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 166–200.
- Myers, Fred (1991) 'Representing culture: the production of discourse(s) for Aboriginal acrylic paintings', *Cultural Anthropology*, 6 (1): 26–62.
- Myers, Fred (2001) 'Introduction: the empire of things', in F. Myers (ed.), *The Empire of Things*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, pp. 3–64.
- Myers, Fred (2002) *Painting Culture: the Making of an Aboriginal High Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Myers, Fred and Marcus, George (1995) Introduction, in George Marcus and Fred Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 1–53.
- Otten, Charlotte M., ed. (1971) *Art and Aesthetics: Readings in Cross-cultural Aesthetics*. New York: Doubleday.
- Phillips, Ruth (1998) *Trading Identities: the Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Phillips, Ruth B. and Steiner, Christopher B. (1999) 'Art, authenticity, and the baggage of cultural encounter', in Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner (eds), *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 3–19.
- Price, Richard and Price, Sally (1999) *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Price, Sally (1989) *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rhodes, Colin (1995) *Primitivism and Modern Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Rubin, William (1984) 'Modernist primitivism: an introduction', in W. Rubin (ed.), *'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the*

- Modern*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp. 1–84.
- Rushing, W. Jackson (1995) *Native American Art and the New York Avant-garde: a History of Cultural Primitivism*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Saunders, Barbara (1997) 'Contested ethnic in two Kwakwaka'waku museums', in J. MacClancy (ed.), *Contesting Art*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 85–130.
- Schildkrout, Enid and Keim, Charles (1990) *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*. New York: American Museum of Natural History.
- Steiner, Christopher (1994) *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, Nicholas (1991) *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thomas, Nicholas (1999) *Possessions: Indigenous Art/ Colonial Culture*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Torgovnick, Marianna (1990) *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Townsend-Gault, Charlotte (2004) 'Circulating Aboriginality', *Journal of Material Culture*, 9 (2): 183–202.
- Vogel, Susan (1989) *Art/Artefact. African Art in Anthropological Collections*. New York: Prestel.
- Wallach, Ami (1989) 'Beautiful Dreamings'. MS (March), pp. 60–4.
- Williams, Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Wingert, Paul (1974) *Primitive Art: its Traditions and Styles*. New York: New American Library.
- Witherspoon, Gary (1977) *Language and Art in the Navaho Universe*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Ziff, Bruce and Rao, Pratima, eds (1997) *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.