

## **Susanne Küchler**

### *Beyond Objects: Art and Agency and the Emerging Theorization of Materiality*

*Art and Agency* was received at a time of an as yet little appreciated paradigm shift in the social sciences. Advances in materials science and associated technological developments finally could no longer be ignored even by the social sciences and the idea of a sociality that once existed without objects had begun to give way to notion of a 'post-social' regime of knowledge in which social relations and, most importantly, knowledge processes are taken over by objects. In the years following the publication of *Art and Agency*, the remaining certainty in a social science method, artificially extended through "sociological imagination and vocabulary" so as to encompass objects, began to unravel as materials capable of agentive capacity began to foreshadow a material world in which objects are not domesticated, and thus not readily possessed by corporate institutions in the same way as earlier machine generated prototypes were. This paper will investigate the crucial role which *Art and Agency* has played in sparking cross-disciplinary conversations in search of a new social science methodology and of a theory of sociality to emerge from the ruins of an object centred world.

## **Jeremy Tanner**

### *Alfred Gell and Comparative Art History*

The reception of Alfred Gell's work in art historical circles has been characterised by a mixture of enthusiasm, and bewilderment: enthusiasm for a framework which promises the ability to facilitate art analysis across cultural boundaries, bewilderment at Gell's apparent eschewal of interest in issues of meaning or aesthetics. In practice, as critics have pointed out, Gell's analyses of specific works of art, and the ways in which they manifest agency, smuggles in reference to cultural meaning which his theoretical framework on the surface seems to disavow. Does this enhance the value of Gell's approach for the comparative study of art, or represent a fundamental theoretical contradiction? In this paper, I will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of 'Art and Agency' in comparison with other recent attempts to develop a cross-cultural basis for the study of art, focussing on the use of figurative representation in the tombs of Mausolus of Caria and The First Emperor of China by way of example.

## **Warren Boutcher**

### *Literary art and agency? Gell and the history of Renaissance texts*

Can Gell's theory be applied to the study of literature and its history? With few exceptions, his model of the 'art nexus' has been applied to visual art and its history. As an anthropologist, Gell himself was primarily interested in non-written communication. In *Art and Agency*, he says unequivocally: 'I do not wish to discuss literary theory, since I am only interested in visual art'. At the end of his essay 'The

Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' he acknowledges that language 'is the most fundamental of all technologies'. He leaves the door open for Gellian studies of verbal poetic art as a kind of musical or performance art. One or two such studies have duly followed. But in setting his whole stall out against the application of certain literature-based theories of semiotics to visual art, Gell did not consider the reverse application of his own art-based theory to the products of literary technology. When he uses examples from the history of Renaissance art, he avoids any discussion of inscriptions or of books. He does not mention that Michelangelo's Moses is holding the tables upon which God is to write his laws. He leaves 'letters' out of the picture. But any historian of Renaissance literature will tell you that 'letters' are ripe for consideration as a technology that magically extends the operations of human faculties such as memory, books and other literary artefacts for consideration as indexes of social relations.

## **Georgina Born**

### *Music: Ontology, Agency and Creativity*

In this paper – drawn from a longer essay – I take Gell's *Art and Agency* to the analysis of music, and in this way suggest new directions relevant more generally to the anthropology of art and material culture. A first step is to argue that music's complex phenomenal and social existence – as more than simply an artefact form – requires a fully-fledged theory of mediation, one that has been developed in the work of Adorno, Hennion and Denora as well as myself, and that is immanent in much ethnomusicology. Such an approach to mediation incorporates understandings of music's social, discursive, material and temporal dimensions, in this way breaking with the Durkheimian 'reflectionism' and expanding upon the Husserlian account of temporality to be found in Gell. A next step is to suggest, through comparative analysis, that music's mediations have taken a number of historical forms, which cohere into assemblages, and that we should be alert both to their diversity and to shifts in the dominant forms of musical assemblage. A third step brings these ideas into dialogue with recent discussions in musicology and ethnomusicology of music's distinctive ontologies. With reference to a comparison between the idealist music ontologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries described by Goehr (*The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*) and the ontologies that can be discerned in mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American popular musics, I argue that Gell's theory is marred by the lack of an account of ontology. The musical cultures discussed suggest that an analytical distinction must be drawn between mediation/the assemblage and ontology, so as to be alert to the way that particular ontologies of music acknowledge or do not acknowledge the specific social relations, materialities and temporalities of different musics, as well as the agency of objects, persons and relations. This theoretical move is necessary, then, in order to account for the socialities, materialities and temporalities that inhere in music-cultural processes; but it is equally necessary in order to elucidate the agency of objects and relations in any musical culture, and, crucially, whether and how this agency is marked ontologically. I suggest, moreover, that this enriched, 'mediational' conception of the musical (or art) object, and of subject-object relations in music (and art), provides the grounds for a non-formalist conception of the aesthetic, and in particular for what might be called a social aesthetics. It provides the basis also for conceptualising changing modes of musical

creativity over the 20<sup>th</sup> century: with reference to jazz, electronic popular musics, and three contemporary digital music experiments, I outline concepts of the provisional work, and of social, distributed and relayed creativity.

## **Chris Gosden**

### *Ontologies and Objects*

Although change and innovation are mentioned in Gell's work, they are not especially highlighted. I shall look at how Gell's writings can be used to understand periods of change, but for this to happen certain new ideas need to be added. Isabelle Stengers has put forward the idea that ontology, our model of the basic structure of the world, is an achievement rather than a given. People and materials come together in various combinations to help produce a version of what the world is and the place of human beings within this. Such a notion helps critique both objectivist and social constructivist views of the world, as both people and materials together bring the world into being. It follows from this that a new set of materials and artefacts will reconfigure the world, giving people novel skills of making and of discrimination in their appreciation of the world. In this paper I shall look at the introduction of new technologies of metalwork in later prehistory in Europe and consider the ways in which new things help retune human sensibilities and aesthetic appreciations. In doing so I will reflect on some key terms in *Art and Agency*, such as the art/aesthetics distinction, the idea of the extended mind and the inter-artefactual domain, which have both fundamentally helped and hindered the development of my own views.

## **Eric Hirsch**

What time do (art) objects embody?

In the concluding chapter of "Art and Agency" there is an extended discussion of 'distributed objects', such as Gawan Kula artefacts or the work of Marcel Duchamp. Gell argues that these objects are indexes of personhood, existing simultaneously as material forms and as intentions. As objects they exist distributed both in space and time. It is the temporal relations that are most significant and Gell draws on Husserl's model of time-consciousness to develop a model of the temporality of distributed objects: unique patterns of protentional and retentional relations existing between objects. In this paper I highlight an aspect of time that Gell does not consider but which has interesting implications. What I draw attention to is the 'presence of time' as embodied by objects. Roy Wagner refers to this as 'epoch' and 'organic time'. Distributed objects, whatever their relations to other objects, take form in a unique 'now', a distinctive presence. Considering this aspect of time gives a better understanding of the way distributed objects of a culture or artists exist. These objects are perceived not only in relation to each other, but to ideas and intentions that make the objects timely and compelling. I examine this with reference to materials from Melanesia and from Europe.

