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The Theory of the Art Nexus

2.1. Constructing a Theory: Terms and Relations

To construct such a theory it is first of all necessary to define certain theoretical entities (terms) and relations. Just now, I suggested that such a theory would ‘look like’ familiar anthropological theories, such as the theory of exchange, or the theory of kinship, but that it would replace some of the terms of such theories with ‘art objects’.

However, this raises immediate difficulties, in that ‘art objects’, ‘works of art’, or ‘artworks’ may form a readily identifiable class of objects in some art systems, but this is hardly true of all of them, especially not in anthropological contexts. In effect, if we make ‘the work of art’ the corner-stone of the anthropological theory of art, the theory itself becomes instantly otiose, for reasons which have already been alluded to. To discuss ‘works of art’ is to discuss entities which have been given a prior *institutional* definition as such. The institutional recognition (or ‘enfranchisement’) of art objects is the subject-matter of the sociology of art, which deals with issues which are complementary to the anthropology of art, but do not coincide with it. Of course, some (in fact, many, or even all) of the objects which fall within the scope of the sociology of art may also be considered ‘anthropologically’ as entities in whose neighbourhoods social relationships are formed; but ‘work of art’ status is irrelevant to this. The anthropology of art, if it is to be distinguished from the sociology of art, cannot restrict its scope to ‘official’ art institutions and recognized works of art. It cannot, in fact, talk about ‘works of art’ at all, not only because of the institutional implications of ‘work of art’ status, but because this term has undesirably exclusive connotations. An object which has been ‘enfranchised’ as an art object, becomes an art object *exclusively*, from the standpoint of theory, and can only be discussed in terms of the parameters of art-theory, which is what being ‘enfranchised’ in this way is all about. The anthropological theory of art cannot afford to have as its primary theoretical term a category or taxon of objects which are ‘exclusively’ art objects because the whole tendency of this theory, as I have been suggesting, is to explore a domain in which ‘objects’ merge with ‘people’ by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things.

I do not promise never to mention art objects again; in fact, I shall do so repeatedly, since excessive terminological consistency is the enemy of intelligibility, my primary objective here. But I do not intend to use ‘art object’ or

‘work of art’ or ‘artwork’ as technical terms, nor to discuss when an object is an ‘art object’ and when it is something else. The technical term I am going to employ is ‘index’. This requires explanation.

2.2. The Index

The anthropology of art would not be the anthropology of *art*, unless it were confined to the subset of social relations in which some ‘object’ were related to a social agent in a distinctive, ‘art-like’ way. We have dismissed the idea that objects are related to social agents ‘in an art-like way’ if (and only if) social agents regard these objects ‘aesthetically’. But in this case, what alternative means can be proposed to distinguish art-like relations between persons and things from relations which are not art-like? To simplify the problem, I shall henceforth confine the discussion to the instance of visual art, or at least, ‘visible’ art, excluding verbal and musical art, though I recognize that in practice these are usually inseparable. So the ‘things’ of which I speak may be understood to be real, physical things, unique and identifiable, not performances, readings, reproductions, etc. These stipulations would be out of place in most discussions of art, but they are necessary here if only because difficulties can best be surmounted one at a time. And it certainly is very difficult to propose a criterion which would distinguish the types of social relations falling under the scope of the ‘anthropology of art’ from any other social relations.

I propose that ‘art-like situations’ can be discriminated as those in which the material ‘index’ (the visible, physical, ‘thing’) permits a particular cognitive operation which I identify as *the abduction of agency*. An ‘index’ in Piercean semiotics is a ‘natural sign’, that is, an entity from which the observer can make a *causal inference* of some kind, or an inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person. The usual example of an ‘index’ is visible smoke, betokening ‘fire’. Fire causes smoke, hence smoke is an ‘index’ of fire. Another very common example of an index is the human smile, indexing a friendly attitude. However, as we all know, smoke can arise in the absence of fire, and smiles may deceive. The cognitive operation through which we infer the presence of fire (given smoke) or friendliness (given the smile) is not like the cognitive operation by means of which we ‘know’ that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that if somebody utters the word ‘dog’ he means ‘canine’ and not ‘railway train’ or ‘butterfly’. Indexes are not part of a calculus (a set of tautologies, like mathematics) nor are they components of a natural or artificial language in which terms have meanings established by convention. Nor are inferences from indexes arrived at by induction or deduction. We have not made a test, and established that by a law of nature, smoke means fire. In fact, we know that smoke may not mean fire, since we know of fire-less ways of producing smoke, or the appearance of smoke. Since smoke as an index of fire does not follow from any known law of nature, deductively or inductively arrived at, and is neither a tautology nor a

convention of language, we need another technical term to designate the mode of inference (or cognitive operation) we bring to bear on indexes.

2.3. Abduction

The term employed in logic and semiotics for such inferences is ‘abduction’. Abduction is a case of synthetic inference ‘where we find some very curious circumstances, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of some general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition’ (Eco 1976: 131, citing Pierce ii. 624). Elsewhere, Eco writes ‘Abduction . . . is a tentative and hazardous tracing of a system of signification rules which allow the sign to acquire its meaning. . . [it] occurs with those natural signs which the Stoicks called indicative and which are thought to be signs, yet without knowing what they signify’ (Eco 1984: 40). Abduction covers the grey area where semiotic inference (of meanings from signs) merges with *hypothetical inferences* of a non-semiotic (or not conventionally semiotic) kind, such as Kepler’s inference from the apparent motion of Mars in the night sky, that the planet travelled in an elliptical path:

Abduction is ‘induction in the service of explanation, in which a new empirical rule is created to render predictable what would otherwise be mysterious’ . . . Abduction is a variety of nondemonstrative inference, based on the logical fallacy of affirming the antecedent from the consequent (*if p then q; but q; therefore p*). Given true premises, it yields conclusions that are not necessarily true. Nevertheless, abduction is an indispensable inference principle, because it is the basic mechanism that makes it possible to constrain the indefinitely large number of explanations compatible with any event. (Boyer 1994: 147, citing J. Holland *et al.* 1986: 89)

I have a particular reason for using the terminology of ‘indexical signs’ and ‘abductions’ therefrom in the present connection. No reasonable person could suppose that art-like relations between people and things do not involve at least some form of semiosis; howsoever one approaches the subject there seems something irreducibly semiotic about art. On the other hand, I am particularly anxious to avoid the slightest imputation that (visual) art is ‘like language’ and that the relevant forms of semiosis are language-like. Discovering the orbits of the planets is not in the least analogous to interpreting a sentence in any natural language. Kepler did not discover the ‘grammar’ of planetary motions, for there is no equivalent to grammar in nature. On the other hand, scientists often speak (metaphorically) of their data as ‘meaning’ this or that, in other words permitting certain inferences which, if they do not appeal to established physical laws, are abductions. The usefulness of the concept of abduction is that it designates a class of semiotic inferences which are, by definition, wholly distinct from the semiotic inferences we bring to bear on the understanding of language, whose ‘literal’ understanding is a matter of observing semiotic

conventions, not entertaining hypotheses derived *ad hoc* from the ‘case’ under consideration (Eco 1984: 40). Abduction, though a semiotic concept (actually, it belongs to logic rather than semiotics) is useful in that it functions to set bounds to linguistic semiosis proper, so that we cease to be tempted to apply linguistic models where they do not apply, while remaining free to posit inferences of a non-linguistic kind.

For our purposes, a more perspicuous example of abductive inference from an index is the instance of smiling ‘meaning’ friendliness. Very much part of the theory I am proposing is the idea that we approach art objects (and members of a larger class of indexes of agency) as if they had ‘physiognomies’ like people. When we see a picture of a smiling person, we attribute an attitude of friendliness to ‘the person in the picture’ and (if there is one) the sitter or ‘subject’ of the picture. We respond to the picture in this way because the appearance of smiling triggers a (hedged) inference that (unless they are pretending) this person is friendly, just as a real person’s smile would trigger the same inference. We have, in short, access to ‘another mind’ in this way, a real mind or a depicted mind, but in either case the mind of a well-disposed person. Without pausing to unravel the very difficult question as to the nature of the relationship between real and depicted persons, the point I want to emphasize here is that the means we generally have to form a notion of the disposition and intentions of ‘social others’ is via a large number of abductions from indexes which are neither ‘semiotic conventions’ or ‘laws of nature’ but something in between. Furthermore, the inferential schemes (abductions) we bring to ‘indexical signs’ are frequently very like, if not actually identical to, the ones we bring to bear on social others. These may seem very elementary points, but they are essential to the anthropology of art.

The minimal definition of the (visual) ‘art’ situation therefore involves the presence of some index from which abductions (belonging to many different species) may be made. This, by itself is insufficiently restrictive, since it will be apparent that, formal reasoning and linguistic semiosis apart, the greater part of ‘thinking’ consists of abductions of one kind or another. To restrict the scope of the discussion, I propose that the category of indexes relevant to our theory are those which permit the abduction of ‘agency’ and specifically ‘social agency’. This excludes instances such as scientific inferences about the orbits of planets (unless one imagines that the planets are social agents, which of course many people do). However, the restriction is narrower than this, and excludes much else besides scientific hypothesis-formation. The stipulation I make is that the *index is itself seen as the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency*. A ‘natural sign’ like ‘smoke’ is not seen as the outcome of any social agency, but as the outcome of a natural causal process, combustion, so, as an index of its non-social cause, it is of no interest to us. On the other hand, if smoke is seen as the index of fire-setting by human agents (burning swiddens, say) then the abduction of agency occurs and smoke becomes an artefactual index, as well

as a ‘natural sign’. To give another example, let us suppose that, strolling along the beach, we encounter a stone which is chipped in a rather suggestive way. Is it perhaps a prehistoric handaxe? It has become an ‘artefact’ and hence qualifies for consideration. It is a tool, hence an index of agency; both the agency of its maker and of the man who used it. It may not be very ‘interesting’ as a candidate object for theoretical consideration in the ‘anthropology of art’ context, but it certainly may be said to possess the minimum qualifications, since we have no *a priori* means of distinguishing ‘artefacts’ from ‘works of art’ (Gell 1996). This would be true even if I concluded that the chipped stone was not actually made by a prehistoric artisan, but, having taken it home anyway, I decide to use it as an ornament for my mantelpiece. Then it has become an index of my agency, and qualifies yet again (besides which it is now obviously a ‘work of art’ i.e. a ‘found object’).

2.4. The Social Agent

However, as is generally the case with definitions, the stipulation that the index must be ‘seen as the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency’ is itself dependent on a still undefined concept, that of ‘social agent’—the one who exercises social agency. Of course it is not difficult to give examples of social agents and social agency. Any person must be considered a social agent, at least potentially.

Agency is attributable to those persons (and things, see below) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who ‘causes events to happen’ in their vicinity. As a result of this exercise of agency, certain events transpire (not necessarily the specific events which were ‘intended’ by the agent). Whereas chains of physical/material cause-and-effect consist of ‘happenings’ which can be explained by physical laws which ultimately govern the universe as a whole, agents initiate ‘actions’ which are ‘caused’ by themselves, by their intentions, not by the physical laws of the cosmos. An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe.

Actually, the nature of the relations between the agent’s beliefs, intentions, etc. and the external events he/she causes to happen by ‘acting’ are philosophically very debatable. Philosophers are far from agreed as to the nature of ‘minds’ harbouring ‘intentions’ and the relation between inner intentions and real-world events. Sociologists, also, have every reason to be aware that agents’ actions very often have ‘unintended consequences’ so that it cannot be said that real-world (social) events are just transcriptions of what agents intended to happen. Fortunately, in order to carry on this particular discussion, I do not have to solve problems which have preoccupied philosophers for centuries. For the anthropologist, the problem of ‘agency’ is not a matter of prescribing the

most rational or defensible notion of agency, in that the anthropologist’s task is to describe forms of thought which could not stand up to much philosophical scrutiny but which are none the less, socially and cognitively practicable.

For the anthropologist ‘folk’ notions of agency, extracted from everyday practices and discursive forms, are of concern, not ‘philosophically defensible’ notions of agency. Some philosophers believe that ‘folk’ notions about agency, intention, mind, etc. constitute a set of philosophically defensible beliefs, but this is of no particular concern to us. I am going to take seriously notions about agency which even these philosophers would probably not want to defend, for example that agency can inhere in graven images, not to mention motor cars (see below). I do so because, in practice, people do attribute intentions and awareness to objects like cars and images of the gods. The idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an ‘intention’ lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of ‘agency’.

Putting the word ‘social’ in front of the word ‘agent’ is in a sense redundant, in so far as the word ‘agency’ primarily serves to discriminate between ‘happenings’ (caused by physical laws) and ‘actions’ (caused by prior intentions). ‘Prior intentions’ implies the attribution to the agent of a mind akin to a human one, if not identical. Animals and material objects can have minds and intentions attributed to them, but these are always, in some residual sense, human minds, because we have access ‘from the inside’ only to human minds, indeed to only one of these, our own. Human minds are inevitably ‘social’ minds, to the extent that we only know our own minds in a social context of some kind. ‘Action’ cannot really be conceptualized in other than social terms. Moreover, the kinds of agency which are attributed to art objects (or indexes of agency) are inherently and irreducibly social in that art objects never (in any relevant way) emerge as agents except in very specific social contexts. Art objects are not ‘self-sufficient’ agents, but only ‘secondary’ agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates, whose identities I discuss below. The philosophical theory of ‘agents’ presupposes the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the human agent; but I am more concerned with the kind of second-class agency which artefacts acquire once they become enmeshed in a texture of social relationships. However, within this relational texture, artefacts can quite well be treated as agents in a variety of ways.

2.5. ‘Things’ as Social Agents

The immediate ‘other’ in a social relationship does not have to be another ‘human being’. My whole argument depends on this not being the case. Social agency can be exercised relative to ‘things’ and social agency can be exercised

by ‘things’ (and also animals). The concept of social agency has to be formulated in this very permissive manner for empirical as well as theoretical reasons. It just happens to be patently the case that persons form what are evidently social relations with ‘things’. Consider a little girl with her doll. She loves her doll. Her doll is her best friend (she says). Would she toss her doll overboard from a lifeboat in order to save her bossy elder brother from drowning? No way. This may seem a trivial example, and the kinds of relations small girls form with their dolls are far from being ‘typical’ of human social behaviour. But it is not a trivial example at all; in fact it is an archetypal instance of the subject-matter of the anthropology of art. We only think it is not because it is an affront to our dignity to make comparisons between small girls showering affection on their dolls and us, mature souls, admiring Michelangelo’s *David*. But what is *David* if it is not a big doll for grown-ups? This is not really a matter of devaluing *David* so much as revaluing little girls’ dolls, which are truly remarkable objects, all things considered. They are certainly social beings—‘members of the family’, for a time at any rate.

From dolls to idols is but a short step, and from idols to sculptures by Michelangelo another, hardly longer. But I do not wish to confine the notion of ‘social relations between persons and things’ to instances of this order, in which the ‘thing’ is a representation of a human being, as a doll is. The concept required here is much broader. The ways in which social agency can be invested in things, or can emanate from things, are exceedingly diverse (see Miller 1987 for a theoretical analysis of ‘objectification’).

Take, for instance, the relationship between human beings and cars. A car, just as a possession and a means of transport is not intrinsically a locus of agency, either the owner’s agency or its own. But it is in fact very difficult for a car owner not to regard a car as a body-part, a prosthesis, something invested with his (or her) own social agency *vis-à-vis* other social agents. Just as a salesman confronts a potential client with his body (his good teeth and well-brushed hair, bodily indexes of business competence) so he confronts the buyer with his car (a Mondeo, late registration, black) another, detachable, part of his body available for inspection and approval. Conversely, an injury suffered by the car is a personal blow, an outrage, even though the damage can be made good and the insurance company will pay. Not only is the car a locus of the owner’s agency, and a conduit through which the agency of others (bad drivers, vandals) may affect him—it is also the locus of an ‘autonomous’ agency of its own.

The car does not just reflect the owner’s personhood, it has personhood as a car. For example, I possess a Toyota which I esteem rather than abjectly love, but since Toyotas are ‘sensible’ and rather dispassionate cars, my Toyota does not mind (it is, after all, Japanese—cars have distinct ethnicities). In my family, this Toyota has a personal name, Toyolly, or ‘Olly’ for short. My Toyota is reliable and considerate; it only breaks down in relatively minor ways at times when it ‘knows’ that no great inconvenience will result. If, God forbid,

my Toyota were to break down in the middle of the night, far from home, I should consider this an act of gross treachery for which I would hold the car personally and morally culpable, not myself or the garage mechanics who service it. Rationally, I know that such sentiments are somewhat bizarre, but I also know that 99 per cent of car owners attribute personality to their cars in much the same way that I do, and that such imaginings contribute to a satisfactory *modus vivendi* in a world of mechanical devices. In effect, this is a form of ‘religious belief’ (vehicular animism) which I accept because it is part of ‘car culture’—an important element in the *de facto* culture of twentieth-century Britain. Because this is a form of ‘animism’ which I actually and habitually practise, there is every reason to make mention of it as a template for imagining forms of animism that I do not happen to share, such as the worship of idols (see Chapter 7 below, and particularly Sections 7.8–9, where the discussion of the ‘agency’ of images is taken up in greater detail).

So, ‘things’ such as dolls and cars can appear as ‘agents’ in particular social situations; and so—we may argue—can ‘works of art’. While some form of hedged agreement to these propositions would, perhaps, be widely conceded in the current climate of conceptual relativism and pragmatism, it would be facile in the extreme not to observe that unwelcome contradictions arrive in their wake.

2.5.1. Paradox Elimination

An agent is defined as one who has the capacity to initiate causal events in his/her vicinity, which cannot be ascribed to the current state of the physical cosmos, but only to a special category of mental states; that is, intentions. It is contradictory to assert that ‘things’ such as dolls and cars can behave as ‘agents’ in contexts of human social interactions, since ‘things’ cannot, by definition have intentions, and moreover, such causal events as occur in their vicinity are ‘happenings’ (produced by physical causes) not ‘actions’ referable to the agency exercised by the thing. The little girl may, possibly, imagine that her doll is another agent, but we are obliged to regard this as an erroneous idea. We can preoccupy ourselves with detecting the cognitive and emotional factors which engender such erroneous ideas—but this is very different from proposing a theory, as I seem to be bent on doing, which accepts such palpable errors in agency-attribution as basic postulates. This appears a dangerous course indeed. A ‘sociology of action’ premised on the intentional nature of agency, undermines itself fatally by introducing the possibility that ‘things’ could be agents, because the whole interpretative enterprise is founded on the strict separation between ‘agency’—exercised by sentient, enculturated, human beings—and the kind of physical causation which explains the behaviour of mere things. However, this paradox can be mitigated, initially, in the light of the following considerations.

Whatever happens, human agency is exercised within the material world. Were the kinds of material cause and effect with which we are familiar not in place, intentional action, action initiated in a social context and with social objectives in view, would be impossible. We can accept that the causal chains which are initiated by intentional agents come into being as states of mind, and that they are orientated towards the states of mind of social ‘others’ (i.e. ‘patients’: see below)—but unless there is some kind of physical mediation, which always does exploit the manifold causal properties of the ambient physical world (the environment, the human body, etc.), agent and patient will not interact. Therefore, ‘things’ with their thing-ly causal properties are as essential to the exercise of agency as states of mind. In fact, it is only because the *causal milieu* in the vicinity of an agent assumes a certain configuration, from which an intention may be abducted, that we recognize the presence of another agent. We recognize agency, *ex post facto*, in the anomalous configuration of the causal milieu—but we cannot detect it in advance, that is, we cannot tell that someone is an agent before they *act as an agent*, before they disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed to their agency. Because the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency in the causal milieu, rather than an unmediated intuition, it is not paradoxical to understand agency as a factor of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live, rather than as an attribute of the human psyche, exclusively. The little girl’s doll is not a self-sufficient agent like an (idealized) human being, even the girl herself does not think so. But the doll is an emanation or manifestation of agency (actually, primarily the child’s own), a mirror, vehicle, or channel of agency, and hence a source of such potent experiences of the ‘co-presence’ of an agent as to make no difference.

I am prepared to make a distinction between ‘primary’ agents, that is, intentional beings who are categorically distinguished from ‘mere’ things or artefacts, and ‘secondary’ agents, which are artefacts, dolls, cars, works of art, etc. through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective. But to call artefactual agents ‘secondary’ is not to concede that they are not agents at all, or agents only ‘in a manner of speaking’. Take, for instance, the anti-personnel mines which have caused so many deaths and mutilations in Cambodia in recent years. Pol Pot’s soldiers, who laid these mines, were, clearly, the agents responsible for these crimes against innocent people. The mines themselves were just ‘instruments’ or ‘tools’ of destruction, not ‘agents of destruction’ in the sense we mean when pinning moral responsibility on Pol Pot’s men, who could have acted differently, while the mines *could not help* exploding once trodden on. It seems senseless to attribute ‘agency’ to a mere lethal mechanical device, rather than its culpable user.

But not so fast. A soldier is not just a man, but a man with a gun, or in this case with a box of mines to sow. The soldier’s weapons are *parts* of him which

make him what he is. We cannot speak of Pol Pot’s soldiers without referring, in the same breath, to their weaponry, and the social context and military tactics which the possession of such weaponry implies. Pol Pot’s men were capable of being the kind of (very malign) agents that they were only because of the artefacts they had at their disposal, which, so to speak, turned them from mere men into devils with extraordinary powers. Their kind of agency would be unthinkable except in conjunction with the spatio-temporally expanded capacity for violence which the possession of mines makes possible. Pol Pot’s soldiers possessed (like all of us) what I shall later discuss as ‘distributed personhood’. As agents, they were not just where their bodies were, but in many different places (and times) simultaneously. Those mines were components of their identities as human persons, just as much as their fingerprints or the litanies of hate and fear which inspired their actions.

If we think of an anti-personnel mine, not as a ‘tool’ made use of by a (conceptually independent) ‘user’, but, more realistically, as a component of a particular type of social identity and agency, then we can more readily see why a mine can be seen as an ‘agent’—that is, but for this artefact, this agent (the soldier + mine) could not exist. In speaking of artefacts as ‘secondary agents’ I am referring to the fact that the origination and manifestation of agency takes place in a milieu which consists (in large part) of artefacts, and that agents, thus, ‘are’ and do not merely ‘use’ the artefacts which connect them to social others. Anti-personnel mines are not (primary) agents who initiate happenings through acts of will for which they are morally responsible, granted, but they are objective embodiments of the *power or capacity to will their use*, and hence moral entities in themselves. I describe artefacts as ‘social agents’ not because I wish to promulgate a form of material-culture mysticism, but only in view of the fact that objectification in artefact-form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of ‘primary’ intentional agents in their ‘secondary’ artefactual forms.

2.5.2. Agents and Patients

Many more examples of social agency being attributed to ‘things’ will be provided as the discussion proceeds, but there is another issue which needs to be dealt with in this connection. There is a special feature of the concept of agency that I am advancing to which I must draw particular attention. ‘Agency’ is usually discussed in relation to the permanent dispositional characteristics of particular entities: ‘here is X, is it an agent or not?’ And the answer is—that depends on whether X has intentions, a mind, awareness, consciousness, etc.’ The issue of ‘agency’ is thus raised in a classificatory context, classifying all the entities in the world into those that ‘count’ as agents, and those that do not. Most philosophers believe that only human beings are *pukka* agents, while a few more would add some of the mammals, such as chimpanzees, and some would also include computers with appropriately ‘intelligent’ software. It is

important to emphasize that I am not raising the question of ‘agency’ in anything like this ‘classificatory’ sense. The concept of agency I employ is relational and context-dependent, not classificatory and context free. Thus, to revert to the ‘car’ example; though I would spontaneously attribute ‘agency’ to my car if it broke down in the middle of the night, far from home, with me in it, I do not think that my car has goals and intentions, as a vehicular agent, that are independent of the use that I and my family make of my car, with which it can co-operate or not. My car is a (potential) agent with respect to me as a ‘patient’, not in respect to itself, as a car. It is an agent only in so far as I am a patient, and it is a ‘patient’ (the counterpart of an agent) only is so far as I am an agent with respect to it.

The concept of agency I employ here is exclusively relational: for any agent, there is a patient, and conversely, for any patient, there is an agent. This considerably reduces the ontological havoc apparently caused by attributing agency freely to non-living things, such as cars. Cars are not human beings, but they act as agents, and suffer as patients ‘in the (causal) vicinity’ of human beings, such as their owners, vandals, and so on. Thus I am not really indulging in paradox or mysticism in describing, as I shall, a picture painted by an artist as a ‘patient’ with respect to his agency as an artist, or the victim of a cruel caricature as a ‘patient’ with respect to the image (agent) which traduces him. Philosophers may rest content with the notion that, in such locutions, the only *pukka* agents are the human ones, and that cars and caricatures (secondary agents) could never be *pukka* agents. I, on the other hand, am concerned not with the philosophical definition of agency *sub specie aeternitatis*. I am concerned with agent/patient relationships in the fleeting contexts and predicaments of social life, during which we certainly do, transactionally speaking, attribute agency to cars, images, buildings, and many other non-living, non-human, things.

In what follows, we will be concerned with ‘social agents’ who may be persons, things, animals, divinities, in fact, anything at all. All that is stipulated is that with respect to *any given transaction* between ‘agents’ one agent is exercising ‘agency’ while the other is (momentarily) a ‘patient’. This follows from the essentially relational, transitive, and causal implications of our notion of ‘agency’. To be an ‘agent’ one must act with respect to the ‘patient’; the patient is the object which is causally affected by the agent’s action. For the purposes of the theory being developed here, it will be assumed that in any given transaction in which agency is manifested, there is a ‘patient’ who or which is another ‘potential’ agent, capable of acting as an agent or being a locus of agency. This ‘agent’ is momentarily in the ‘patient’ position. Thus, in the ‘car’ example just considered, if my car breaks down in the middle of the night, I am in the ‘patient’ position and the car is the ‘agent’. If I should respond to this emergency by shouting at, or maybe even punching or kicking my unfortunate vehicle, then I am the agent and the car is the patient, and so on. The various

possibilities and combinations of agency/patency will be described in detail later on.

It is important to understand, though, that ‘patients’ in agent/patient interactions are not entirely passive; they may resist. The concept of agency implies the overcoming of resistance, difficulty, inertia, etc. Art objects are characteristically ‘difficult’. They are difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments. Moreover, in the vicinity of art objects, struggles for control are played out in which ‘patients’ intervene in the enchainment of intention, instrument, and result, as ‘passive agents’, that is, intermediaries between ultimate agents and ultimate patients. Agent/patient relations form nested hierarchies whose characteristics will be described in due course. The concept of the ‘patient’ is not, therefore a simple one, in that being a ‘patient’ may be a form of (derivative) agency.

2.6. *The Artist*

However, we still have not specified the situation sufficiently to circumscribe the scope of an ‘anthropological theory of art’. Agency can be ascribed to ‘things’ without this giving rise to anything particularly recalling the production and circulation of ‘art’. For this to be the case it seems necessary to specify the identity of the participants in social relations in the vicinity of the ‘index’ rather more precisely.

The kinds of ‘index’ with which the anthropological theory of art has to deal are usually (but not always) artefacts. These artefacts have the capacity to index their ‘origins’ in an act of *manufacture*. Any artefact, by virtue of being a manufactured thing, motivates an abduction which specifies the identity of the agent who made or originated it. Manufactured objects are ‘caused’ by their makers, just as smoke is caused by fire; hence manufactured objects are indexes of their makers. The index, as manufactured object, is in the ‘patient’ position in a social relationship with its maker, who is an agent, and without whose agency it would not exist. Since art-making is the kind of making with which we are primarily concerned, it might be most convenient to call the one to whom the authorship of the index (as a physical thing) is attributed, ‘the artist’. Wherever it is appropriate, I shall do so, but it is important to note that the anthropology of art cannot be exclusively concerned with objects whose existence is attributed to the agency of ‘artists’, especially ‘human’ artists. Many objects which are in fact art objects manufactured by (human) artists, are not believed to have originated in that way; they are thought to be of divine origin or to have mysteriously made themselves. The origins of art objects can be forgotten or concealed, blocking off the abduction leading from the existence of the material index to the agency of an artist.

2.7. *The Recipient*

Art objects lead very transactional lives; being ‘made by an artist’ is only the first of these. Often an art object indexes, primarily, not the moment and agent of its manufacture, but some subsequent, purely transactional, ‘origin’. This applies, for instance, to ceremonial valuables in Melanesia (such as Kula shells) whose actual makers (who are not in the Kula system) are forgotten—Kula shells ‘originate’ with whoever possessed them as a *kitoum*, that is, as unencumbered ceremonial property (Leach and Leach 1983).

Similarly, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, one may see the beautiful carved onyx cup of the Mogul emperor, Shah Jehan. This cup is Shah Jehan’s *kitoum* for all that it is now British government property. But there is a difference, in that in Shah Jehan’s cup, we see, first and foremost, the power of the Mogul emperor to command the services of craftsmen possessing more skill and inventiveness than any to be found nowadays. Shah Jehan’s agency is not as a maker, but as a ‘patron’ of art, and his cup indexes his glory in this respect, which contemporary potentates can only emulate in feeble, vulgar, ways.

Thus a second abduction of agency which an index in the form of an artefact normally motivates is the abduction of its ‘destination’, its intended reception. Artists do not (usually) make art objects for no reason, they make them in order that they should be seen by a public, and/or acquired by a patron. Just as any art object indexes its origins in the activity of an artist, it also indexes its reception by a public, the public it was primarily made ‘for’. A Ferrari sports car, parked in the street, indexes the class-fraction of ‘millionaire playboys’ for whom such cars are made. It also indexes the general public who can only admire such vehicles and envy their owners. A work of contemporary art indexes the contemporary art public, who constitute the intended recipients of such work. If the work is to be seen in the Saachi gallery, it indexes this famous collector and his patronage of contemporary art. And so on. In the course of their careers, art objects can have many receptions. While I am able to feel that I belong (as a gallery-goer and occasional reader of *Art Now* and similar periodicals) to the ‘intended’ public for contemporary art, I know perfectly well that the Egyptian art in the British Museum was never intended for my eyes. This art permits the vicarious abduction of its original, or intended reception, as a component of its current, non-intended reception.

The public, or ‘recipients’ of a work of art (index) are, according to the anthropological theory of art, in a social relationship with the index, either as ‘patients’ (in that the index causally affects them in some way) or as ‘agents’ in that, but for them, this index would not have come into existence (they have caused it). The relation between the index and its reception will be analysed in greater detail in due course. For the present it is sufficient to stipulate that an index has always to be seen in relation to some specific reception and that this reception may be active or passive, and is likely to be diverse.

2.8. *The Prototype*

To complete the specification of the network of social relationships in the vicinity of art objects, we need only one more concept, one which need not always apply, but which very commonly does. Most of the literature about ‘art’ is actually about representation. That representation is the most complicated philosophical and conceptual problem stemming from the production and circulation of works of art there is no doubt. Of course, by no means all ‘art’ actually is representational, even in the barest sense, and often it is the case that the ‘representational content’ of art is trivial, even if the art is representational (e.g. the bottles and guitars in Cubist still lifes, or the botanically arbitrary flowers and leaves in textile patterns). I do not propose to discuss the problem of representation as a philosophical problem in any detail. I should, however, state that I espouse the anti-Goodmanian view which has been gaining ground recently (Schier 1986). I do not believe that iconic representation is based on symbolic ‘convention’ (comparable to the ‘conventions’ which dictate that ‘dog’ means ‘canine animal’ in English). Goodman, in a well-known philosophical treatise (1976), asserts that any given icon, given the appropriate conventions for reception, could function as a ‘representation’ of any arbitrarily selected depicted object or ‘referent’. The analogy between this proposition and Saussure’s well-known postulate of the ‘arbitrary nature of the sign’ does not need to be underlined. I reject this implausible claim as an overgeneralization of linguistic semiotics. On the contrary, and in accordance with the traditional view, I believe that iconic representation is based on the actual resemblance in form between depictions and the entities they depict or are believed to depict. A picture of an existing thing resembles that thing in enough respects to be recognized as a depiction or model of it. A depiction of an imaginary thing (a god, for instance) resembles the picture that believers in that god have in their minds as to the god’s appearance, which they have derived from other images of the same god, which this image resembles. The fact that ‘the picture that people have in their minds’ of the god’s appearance is actually derived from their memories of images which purport to represent this appearance does not matter. What matters to me is only that people believe that the causal arrow is orientated in the other way; they believe that the god, as agent, ‘caused’ the image (index), as patient, to assume a particular appearance.

It is true that some ‘representations’ are very schematic, but only very few visual features of the entity being depicted need to be present in order to motivate abductions from the index as to the appearance (in a much more completely specified form) of the entity depicted. ‘Recognition’ on the basis of very under-specified cues is a well-explored part of the process of visual perception. Under-specified is not the same as ‘not specified at all’, or ‘purely conventional’.

One can only speak of representation in visual art where there is resemblance, triggering recognition. One may need to be told that a given index is an iconic representation of a particular pictorial subject. ‘Recognition’ may not occur spontaneously, but once the necessary information has been supplied, the visual recognition cues must be present, or recognition will still not occur.

Meanwhile, there are indexes which refer to other entities (such as gods, again) which (a) are visible, but which (b) do not permit abductions as to the visual appearance of the entity (god) because they lack any visual recognition cues. Sometimes gods are ‘represented’ by stones, but the god does not ‘look like’ a stone in anybody’s estimation, believer or non-believer alike. The anthropology of art has to consider such instances of ‘aniconic’ representation, as well as the ones involving more or less overt visual cues as to the appearance of the entity being represented. There are many forms of ‘representation’ in other words, only one of which is the representation of *visual form*. Approximately, the aniconic image of the god in the form of a stone is an index of the god’s spatio-temporal presence, but not his appearance. But in this case, the spatial location of the stone is not ‘arbitrarily’ or ‘conventionally’ associated with the spatial location of the god; the stone functions as a ‘natural sign’ of the god’s location just as smoke is a natural sign of the spatial location of fire.

In what follows I shall use the term ‘the prototype’ (of an index) to identify the entity which the index represents visually (as an icon, depiction, etc.) or non-visually, as in the example just considered. Not all indexes have prototypes or ‘represent’ anything distinct from themselves. Abstract geometric patterns have no discernible or relevant prototype, but such abstract decorative forms are of great importance theoretically, as I shall describe later. As with the artist (the originator of an index) and the recipient of an index, I hold that there are various types of social agency/patency relationships linking indexes and their prototypes, where they exist. That is to say, there is a species of agency which is abducted from the index, such that the prototype is taken to be an ‘agent’ in relation to the index (causing it, for instance, to have the appearance that it actually has). Conversely, the prototype may be made into a social ‘patient’ via the index (as in ‘volt sorcery’, to be described later).

2.9. Summary

Let me briefly recapitulate the argument so far. The ‘anthropological theory of art’ is a theory of the social relations that obtain in the neighbourhood of works of art, or indexes. These social relationships form part of the relational texture of social life within the biographical (anthropological) frame of reference. Social relations only exist in so far as they are made manifest in actions. Performers of social actions are ‘agents’ and they act on ‘patients’ (who are social agents in the ‘patient’ position *vis-à-vis* an agent-in-action). Relations between social agents and patients, for the purposes of the anthropological

theory of art, obtain between four ‘terms’ (entities which can be in relation). These are:

1. Indexes: material entities which motivate abductive inferences, cognitive interpretations, etc.;
2. Artists (or other ‘originators’): to whom are ascribed, by abduction, causal responsibility for the existence and characteristics of the index;
3. Recipients: those in relation to whom, by abduction, indexes are considered to exert agency, or who exert agency via the index;
4. Prototypes: entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily.