ART/artifact

African Art in Anthropology Collections

with essays by

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Artifact and Art

We must sharpen our critical judgement, for the pitfalls of superficial affinities may lead and have led to strange misconceptions.
Rudolph Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols.*

Whatever they may mean, and however they may be perceived and responded to by their contemporaries, works of art are dense with latent properties that will be revealed and appreciated only later, through modes of consciousness contemporaries cannot have imagined. Because of the limits of historical or cultural imagination, whole arrays of artistic qualities may be invisible until released, as if by the transformative kiss in the fairy tale, through which the radiant prince is released from the frogdom in which he had been cast by a spell. Correggio was transformed into an ancestor of the Baroque when the Carracci discovered in his use of gesture, and in his deployment of autonomous and agitated draperies, devices of expression that they had reinvented for artistic purposes Correggio and his contemporaries would not have understood. Botticelli emerged as a major artist when the fervent manner of Baroque exaggeration stopped being credible, and artists sought paradigms of clarity and form in painting before Raphael or Correggio. The Japanese masters of the wood-block print were turned into predecessors and masters by the Post-Impressionists, and cherished for discoveries in space, shape, and color to which the Japanese had to have been blind, because they did not know the European traditions the French enthusiasts for *ukiyo-e* were repudiating. Long after Impressionism seemed the style of another era, distanced by modernism and out of date, the Abstract Expressionists discovered in the late work of Monet an exact anticipation in scale and spirit of their own painterly imperatives. Frank Stella has recently claimed Caravaggio for the history of Abstraction, and there is an art-historical question of what it was in Caravaggio that rendered him, if not unknown then merely eccentric until his reinstatement as a great master in the 1950s. And certain shifts in Post-Modern sensibility have restored to aesthetic credibility the vast fabrications of high academicism, and raised them, like Lazaruses, from museum basements, to which they had been consigned by modernist canons of good taste, and housed them in galleries built explicitly to give them the dignity of second lives. What we see in one art is very much a function of what we see in other art.

The past was once regarded as immutable. Even God, for all the omnipotence ascribed to Him, was deemed by theologians incapable of making happen what had not taken place, or bringing about an order of events different from that which actually transpired. But the restless progress and revolutionizing essence of Western art has entailed a certain steady instability in artworks already completed, preventing their subsiding into any fixed identity. Not simply value, but structure and meaning shift and turn in the retroactive perspectives opened by succeeding movements of artistic creation. And as the rate of succession has accelerated in the present century, the past itself has exhibited a certain openness and uncertainty once believed to characterize only the future. In recreating the artistic present, artists have recreated the past in such a way that their predecessors become their virtual contemporaries.

Because of the dilating substance of individual artworks in the backward illuminations of present art, the belief that art itself must lack a stable identity becomes irresistible, that anything can be a work of art even though it may not have had that exalted status when it was first made, and that the boundaries of art are themselves philosophically indeterminate. One chief purpose of the present essay is to resist this belief. It does not follow from the facts with which I began, namely that works of art have latencies that become actual when released by other, later works of art, that art itself, as a concept and category, has a corresponding openness. It is one thing to say that what a work of art is, is a function of what other works of art show it to be. It is quite another thing to say that whether something is a work of art at all is a function of what other things are works of art. The population of artworks is a mutually self-enriching system of objects, any given member of which is considerably richer because of the existence of other artworks than it would have been if it alone existed (it is an independently interesting question whether there could be only one artwork in the world). But something must already be an artwork to benefit from this enrichment. The boundary between art and the rest of reality is, on the other hand, philosophically inflexible. It is of course possible to *discover* something to be a work of art, even a great work of art, which before then was regarded as having occupied a vastly less exalted, vastly more dubious status.

I take Picasso to have been just such a discoverer when he underwent, in May or June of 1907, an epiphany among the dusty display cases in the ethnographic museum in the Palais du Trocadero. There, amidst the emblems of imperial conquest or scientific curiosity, amidst what must have been taken as palpable evidence of the artistic superiority of European civilization and therein palpable justificatory grounds for cultural intervention, Picasso perceived absolute masterpieces of sculptural art, on a level of achievement attained only at their best by the acknowledged masterpieces of the Western sculptural tradition. "We have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements," Roger Fry wrote in 1920 of an exhibition at the Chelsea Book Club of what he termed "Negro sculpture." "It seems unfair," he continued, "to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than we as a nation have ever possessed it."[1] African sculpture must have been identified, barely, as art in the nineteenth century, if only to

ıark the superiority of Western art over it. Fry's critical ssessment—"some of these things are great sculpıre—greater, I think, than anything we produced even the Middle Ages"—was a consequence of a transvalation of sculptural values that had to have been shockg, perhaps was intended to be shocking, to those who ıok the cultural inferiority of Africans as a given. So ackward, so uncivilized, so *savage* (Fry's word), so *rimitive* (everyone else's word), a humanity had no ght to produce *great* works of art. There really is a eep injustice in the distribution of genius. Someone ıay be trained, cultivated, gifted, brilliant—and yet his t be inferior to that of a lout, a seeming clown, a stamıering fool. And here were whole peoples and cultures e British character must have judged as immeasurably ackward, hardly even human—and their sculptural outıt was being praised in the company of Donatello or errocchio, Bernini and Houdon, Canova, Thorwaldsen, arpeaux and Rodin—and as altogether beyond the caacity of Lord Leighton, Sir William Hamo Thornycroft, Mr. Alfred Stevens.

Picasso's discovery was possible only because paintg and sculpture in his own tradition had undergone ıanges of a kind that made the values of African culpture visible, at least to someone who had particiated in effecting those changes. In this respect, I supose, his relationship to art from an alien culture is of a ece with the relationship in which the Carracci stood the end of the sixteenth century to Correggio at its eginning. Certain internal developments in Italian art, ue in part to external developments in religious beliefs ıd institutions which mandated changes in artistic repsentation, made it possible to see, in work from which e Carracci were separated by decades, models to folw in Correggio, an artist who had been regarded as ackward and provincial by his own contemporaries. Pisso's own breakthroughs, his powerful redefinition of e whole purpose of painting, like a great political revotion, raised those dispossessed African objects into e regions of high art from their erstwhile captivity in e precincts of ethnographic study. If Picasso had mething of great moment to tell the world, so, against probability, had they. In liberating himself from his vn representational traditions, Picasso liberated the art Africa from those same traditions, in the light of which ey could not be seen for what they were. In the pross, he restructured the way we were to see all of art restructuring the way we saw *that* art.

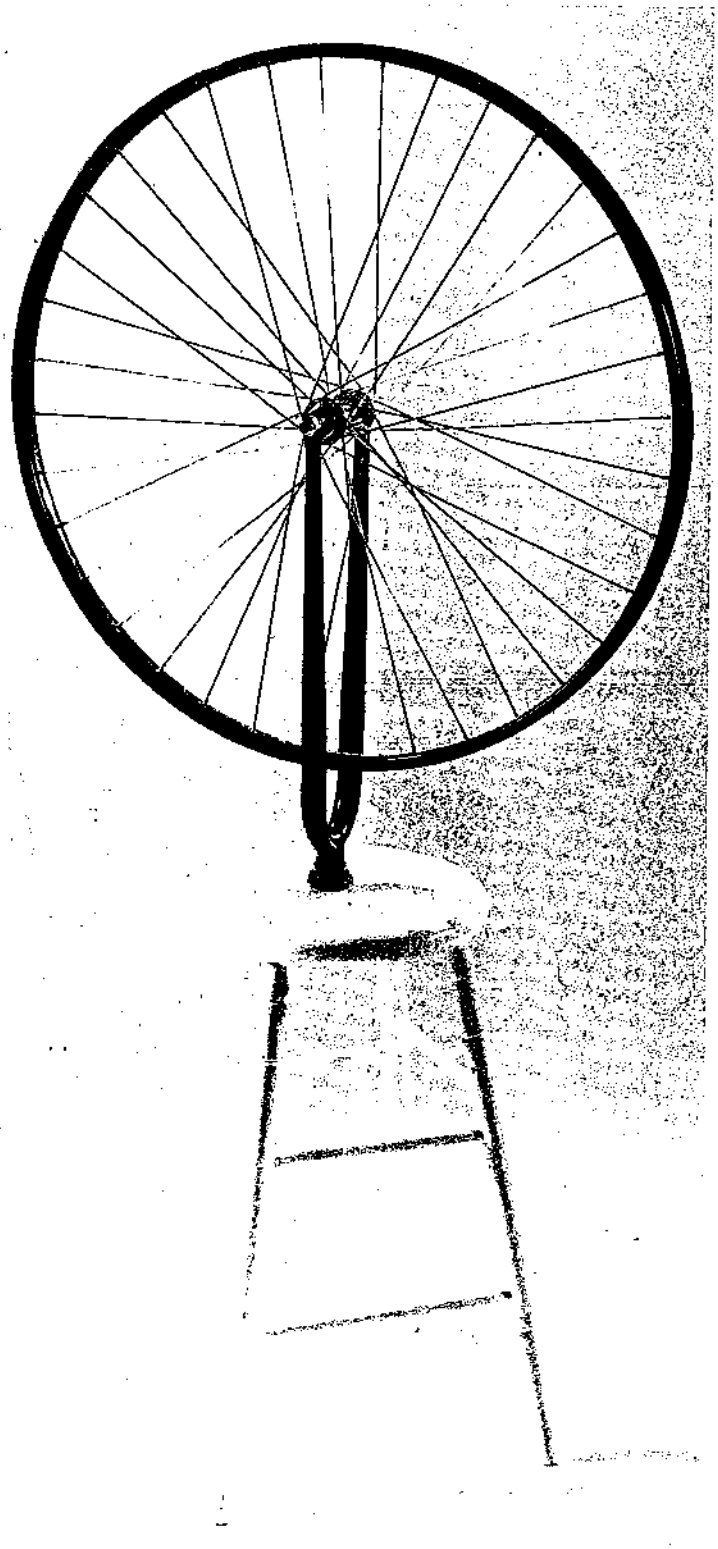
One can *discover* only what is *already there* but has mained up until then unknown or misrecognized. My oint then is that Picasso discovered, through the distions induced by incorrect and misapplied artistic eories as much as by cultural prejudice, the fact—own or not—that the master carvers of Africa were tists and that artistic greatness was possible for them, t simply within their own traditions, but against the ghest artistic standards anywhere. It was a discovery in the same sense as that in which Columbus discovered America, or Freud discovered the Unconscious, or Roentgen discovered X-rays. The works of Africa were thereafter artistically enfranchised because there was no consistent way of excluding them from aesthetic consciousness—no way of acknowledging Picasso as a master without acknowledging the mastery of African artists (which is not to say that they were doing the same thing, whatever the outward affinities, and lines of influence—which in any case Picasso denied).

Now Twentieth Century art has undergone some remarkable changes since Picasso's revolutionizing experiments and perceptions. These changes have seemed at times so cataclysmic as to make Picasso look almost traditional in retrospect. The boundary lines between the arts have been redrawn, as have been the boundary lines between art, taken in the most global sense, and the rest of life. Works have emerged in the course of these upheavals that outwardly resemble objects heretofore regarded as logically external to the traditions that defined great art. These objects—a snow shovel, a bicycle wheel, a urinal, a soup can—would have been precisely those by reference to which the contrast between art and mere reality could be taught. It was the collective effort of Duchamp and Warhol, Oldenberg and Lichtenstein, Robert Morris and Jackie Winsor, to call in question the method of teaching the meaning of art by pointing to objects that were clearly not works of art. Their aggregate lesson was that objects exactly like them could be made which really were works of art, so that art was not merely a question of

Drowning Girl, 1963. Roy Lichtenstein. Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 67 ⅝ x 66 ¾ in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Philip Johnson Fund and Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright.

what kind of object one was dealing with, at least not on the level of simple perception. The meaning of "art" could not be taught by means of examples in that way.

Now here is one way to think about the matter. Picasso, correlatively with his discovery of African art as art, evolved an art of his own which in certain unmistakable outward respects greatly resembled the art that so excited him in the ethnographic museum. It was as though the objects from the Palais du Trocadero and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* rose together, in a single impulse, into the space of high art. The resemblance together with the inspiration could then be taken as the basis of the enfranchisement. Exactly this premise, it seems to me, was the basis used to justify a connection between Primitive art and Modern art as a single artistic totality in the methodologically flawed 1984 exhibition, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, mounted, to critical consternation, by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. If that is the basis, then what is to prevent a similar enfranchisement of objects heretofore considered to be as remote from the domain of high art as African masks had been before Picasso? Suppose an artist in Soho begins to make, as artworks, shanty-like fabrications out of palm fronds and rough poles, not remarkably or at all different from the commonplace dwelling of the West Africans? Will that fact constitute the shanties themselves as art works, and justify our exhibiting them, as the Chelsea Book Club exhibited "Negro sculpture," for the enlightened aesthetic responses of Roger Frys to come?



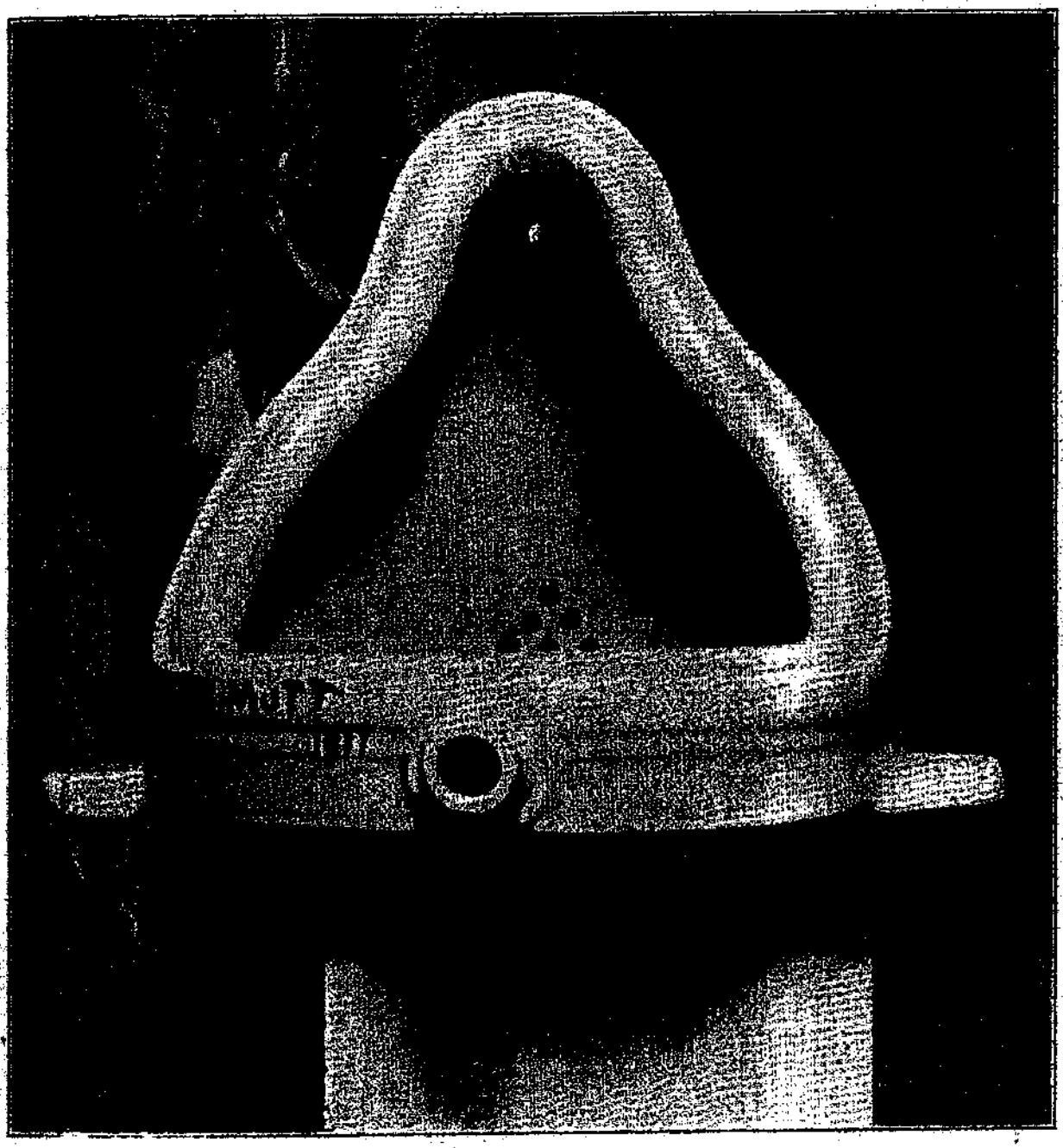
Bicycle Wheel, 1913. Marcel Duchamp. Bicycle wheel mounted on painted wooden stool, H. 49 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Galleria Sclurerz, Milan.

Of course we can respond to these objects aesthetically. Susan Vogel showed me a photograph of a net she meant to use as a central exhibit in the present show (p. 175). A fine photograph of a subtly illuminated object made its deep mahoganies and blue shadows as salient as its reticular form, and the sheer mysteriousness of its isolated presence made it dramatically beautiful, and if it were a work of art it would be compellingly powerful and even great. Contemporary art has made us aesthetically responsive to objects such as this, but that does not transform them into works of art. In some sense Warhol's *Brillo Box* was "inspired" by the ordinary Brillo boxes it so precisely resembled. But that did not turn the ordinary packing cartons into works of art, even if a case can be made that Warhol elevated them as objects of aesthetic consciousness. *Anything* can become an object of detached aesthetic scrutiny—the teeth of a dead dog, to cite an example of Saint Augustine, or the purpled eyelids of his dead wife, as in the case of Claude Monet. These of course were real things, in contrast to works of art or artifacts, but whatever the appearances, the line between art and reality, as the line between artwork and artifact, is absolute. How then are we to identify these lines, if perception and aesthetic qualities will not serve to do it? How do we justify the inclusion, as works of art, of things Picasso's work resembled and perhaps was inspired by, and yet exclude, as mere artifacts, objects from Primitive cultures that may have inspired works of Modern art—such as Warhol's—that they now resemble? Well, however we are to do it, we cannot get very far with the

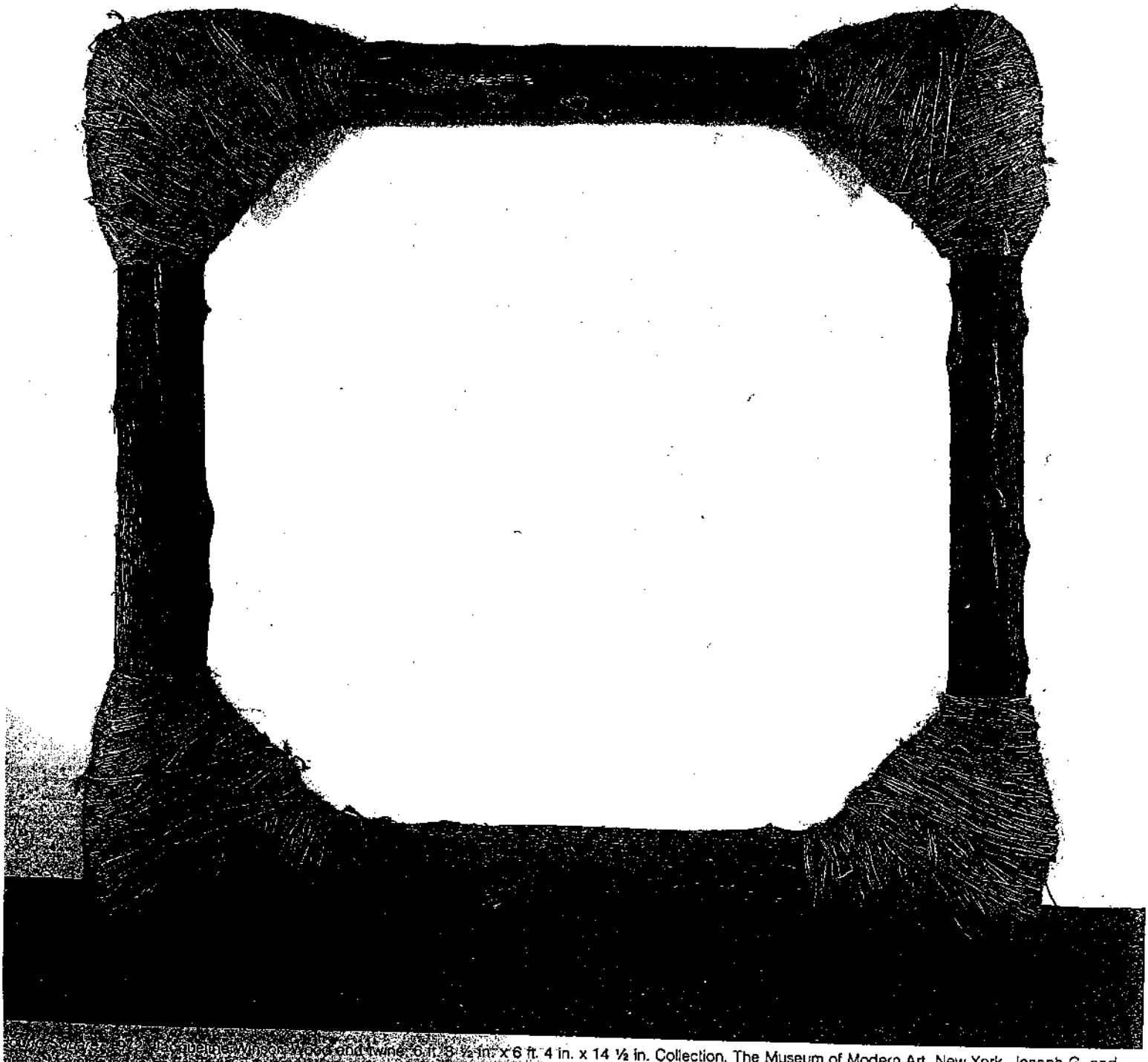
Fountain, 1917. Marcel Duchamp. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Arensberg Archives.

Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



THE EXHIBIT REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS



Rubbing, Wilson Wood and twine, 6 ft. 8 ½ in. x 6 ft. 4 in. x 14 ½ in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Joseph G. and Vivian Hirshhorn Fund, 57. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby.

history of inspiration or the fact of formal affinity or similarity of surface or perceptual congruity.

A good philosophical procedure for drawing lines consists in imagining things on opposite sides of them that have in common as many properties as possible, for at least it will be plain that what divides them cannot be located in what they share. In drawing the distinction between artworks and mere things, for example, the history of contemporary art has been extremely fertile in generating things so outwardly similar that no perceptual criterion seems relevant to that task. Before Duchamp, it had seemed obvious that the distinction between artworks and other things was perceptual, that paintings looked as distinct from other things as roses, say, look distinct from tomcats. With Duchamp, and those who followed him, it became philosophically evident that the differences are not of a kind that meets or even can meet the eye. And now we have before us the example of a possible work of contemporary art and an artifact from a Primitive culture that are at least as much alike as an ordinary snowshovel and *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. We might make the matter even more complicated by enlisting the current strategy of "appropriation," so that the contemporary artist "appropriates" the Primitive artifact and displays it as a work of art. Putting an object forward in an act of display does not help solve the problem, since often the identical object can be displayed either as a work of art or an artifact, though admittedly there are conventions of display which in practice remove or reduce the ambiguity.

I want to approach this question by a more detailed imaginary example. I shall invent a plausible anthropology for a pair of African tribes occupying distant regions of the same vaguely bounded area, but separated by some geographical feature that has enabled them to evolve in different ways, even though the differences may not be obvious to field investigators who are immediately if superficially impressed by the great resemblances between Tribe A and Tribe B, to be known respectively as the Pot People and the Basket Folk.

Both tribes are known for their baskets and their pots. The baskets are tightly woven and of an extreme simplicity of design. The pots have a certain squat elegance, and their smooth sides strike out from the base in a daring curve, and then curve back sharply, as if in emulation of the trajectory of a marvelous bird, to form the wide mouth, a perfect circle. The pots have a pattern of solid semi-circles, like a necklace, circling their necks. Perhaps the tribes were part of a single nation in time past memory, for the pots and the baskets of one look exactly like the pots and baskets of the other. There are differences, even deep differences, but they are not of a kind that meets the eye. It is these I mean now to describe.

The Basket Folk—that is the name they give themselves and I shall respect their name—stand in a special relationship to their baskets, which are for them objects of great meaning and possessed of special powers, evidence for which resides in the fact that even years after they have been shaped, baskets left in the soft rain of the mountain slope where these people are found give off the odor of fresh grasses, as if they carried the memory of their beginnings—as if when touched by water the grasses return to their youth and strength, as the Basket Folk themselves hope to do after death. The baskets show, by profound analogy, that we carry our youth within ourselves as an eternal essence. The Wise Persons of this tribe tell us that the world itself is a basket, woven of grass and air and water by her whom I shall respect them by calling God, who is a Basketmaker. The basketmakers of the tribe imitate God in her creativity, much as painters and sculptors imitate God in His creativity, according to Giorgio Vasari. These works embody the principles of the universe itself, and each basket gives occasion for reflection at how the unlikely strands of the universe hold together by forces the Basket Folk regard as magic, and evidence of powers they can at most imitate (if they have a philosophy of art it is: art is imitation). Men, women, and animals are built upon the principles of the basket, a weave of grass and wind that unravels at death, but only momentarily. A man's wealth is in his baskets, and basketmakers are, appropriately, greatly respected. They are almost like priests.

The Basket Folk's potmakers, on the other hand, are artisans like any other. Pots are useful and necessary, every household has four or five, but however admired they may be by missionaries and ethnographers, the Basket Folk attach no further importance to them: they are of a piece with fishnets and arrow heads, textiles of bark and flax, or the armatures of wood that give shape to their dwellings. If they had the words, they would describe baskets as artworks, and their pots as artifacts. The baskets in any case belong to what Hegel has called Absolute Spirit: a realm of being which is that of art, religion, and philosophy. The pots are merely part of what, with his genius for phrase, he spoke of as The Prose of the World.

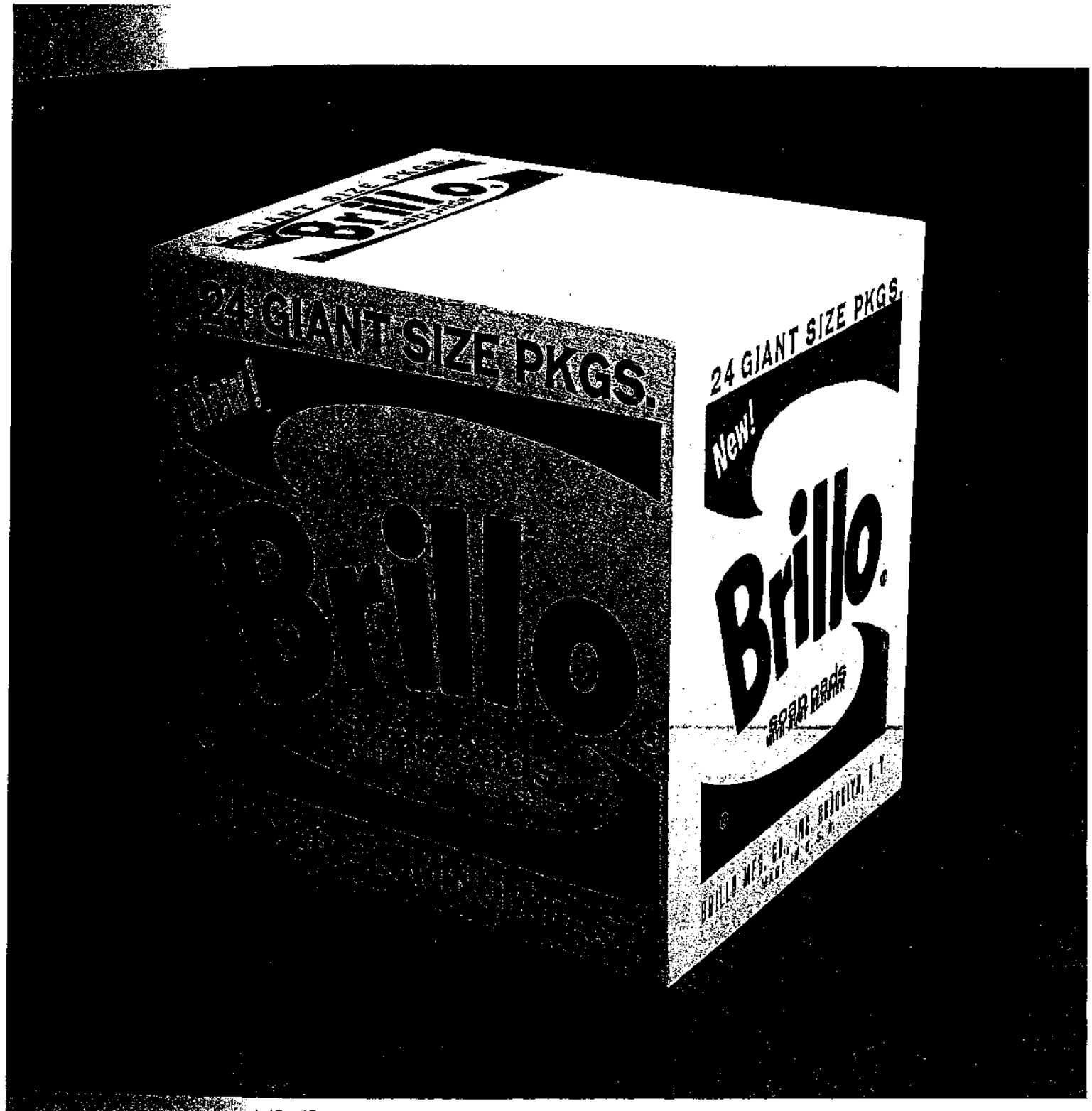
This philosophical allocation is precisely reversed in the worldview of their neighboring tribe, whose own practice I follow in calling them the Pot People. There is an ethic of craftsmanship that governs the manufacture of their baskets, whose meaning is their use as items of domestic life, whose essence is defined by daily function. The pots, by contrast, are thick with significations, for in them are stored the seeds, reserved from last year's harvest, to be used in the agricultural year to come. So the pots have a use, though this is quite transcended by their meaning. The Wise Persons among the Pot People say that God is a potmaker, having shaped the universe out of primal unformed clay, and potters, who are artists, are inspired agents who re-enact in their art the primal process through which the blank disorder of mere dirt is given grace, meaning,

beauty, and even use. Indeed this people can hardly look upon pots without feeling themselves symbolically present at the beginning of the world order. Predictably, they hold that human beings, and most especially womenfolk, are pots, for they carry in their inner emptiness the seeds of the next generation. The semi-circles, incidentally, are half-moons, referring to the turning of the seasons, though the same semi-circles, in the Basket Folk culture, have no meaning to speak of—they simply say pots do not look right if they lack these—and specialists conjecture that some meaning has been lost. Basket aestheticians shrug their shoulders when queried about these marks, saying only that pots have always been made that way though admittedly they would carry water or store seeds quite as effectively without them. Pot people are by no means certain that the half-moons are irrelevant to the deep function of pots, which is, of course, to insure continuity, nourishment, well-being, and life. Lying at the cross point of art, philosophy, and religion, the pots of the Pot People belong to Absolute Spirit. Their baskets, tightly woven to insure sustained utility, are drab components in the Prose of the World.

It has at times struck anthropologists as curious that neither of these tribes, for all their evolved cosmology and artisan skill, should have among their cultural objects anything that seems to represent the human form. Their art accordingly seems truly primitive and merely symbolic. This observation would strike members of either tribe as perplexing and false. For the Basket Folk, human beings really are baskets; as for the Pot People they are pots. Missionaries reason patiently with their backward subjects, saying that anyone can see that there is no greater resemblance between a person and a pot than there is between a pot and a basket—we, made in the image of God, do not look like these mere things at all. And perhaps the anthropologist may point back and forth between the image of a Basket person and a basket—or a Pot person and a pot—the anthropologist feels that it hardly needs stating that they do not look alike, certainly not in the way a son looks like his father or two villagers resemble one another. For the Basket and the Pot persons, such considerations have no weight whatever. Anyone can see there is not this resemblance. Their point is that people really are, appearances notwithstanding, baskets (or pots), that like baskets (or pots) we are woven (or shaped) in mysterious ways, and, that for reasons no less mysterious, we become unravelled (or sharded). Of course the resemblances do not meet the eye, which is why we need Wise Persons to enable us to see and admire the deep harmonies and correspondences in the universe that move us to wonder.

Now the anthropologists accept that the baskets of the Basket Folk—though not the baskets of the Pot People—and the pots of the Pot People—though not the pots of the Basket Folk—have a spiritual identity altogether lacking in the interdiscernable objects from the other tribe. Let us imagine now a museum of fine arts in the capital of the country which financed their expeditions and field trips. It faces, across a park, a museum of natural history, much as the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* faces the *Naturhistorisches Museum* across the Mariatheresianplatz in Vienna—or The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History stand on opposite sides of Central Park in New York. The Fine Arts Museum has a wing for anthropological art. The wing for Primitive art reflects the revolution in artistic perception ushered in by Picasso's discoveries at the Palais du Trocadero. It was realized that objects of the greatest artistic significance had been housed all these years in the anthropological wing of the Natural History Museum because of misapplied theories of art, very much like the theories that initially blinded critics to the merit of Impressionist and certainly of Post-Impressionist painting—theories which, if true, would in fact have ruled Picasso's work out as art, and explained it as the daubing of a madman or a charlatan trying to put something over on us. All of that has changed, and everyone today is disposed to regard Primitive art as art of often the greatest degree of achievement. Collectors have donated some marvelous examples to the Fine Arts Museum, and enthusiasts and philanthropists have in fact built the wing, whose curators nevertheless look with envy across the park to the anthropological wing of the Natural History Museum, to which collectors had donated specimens and to which bales and boxes of Primitive carvings and assemblages were brought back for scientific purposes, and incidentally to enable citizens to see how really backward our black brothers really are, how considerable the distance is between them and us, as anyone with eyes to see with can see, immediately and convincingly, by visiting the galleries of Renaissance painting and sculpture in the Museum of Fine Arts.

The curators of the Natural History Museum recognize the anomaly, but in the manner of their kind they are not in the least anxious to rectify it by giving their collections over to the Primitive Wing in exchange for certain of the Fine Art Museum's collections whose claim to art remains under contest—wrought iron work from medieval Spain, swords or halberds from Nuremburg, and certain other things, of unquestioned craft, which may forever be but high-class artifacts. With the objects gathered from the Basket Folk and the Pot People, there is no such problem. The baskets of the former and the pots of the latter are housed, as they should be, in the Primitive Wing of the Fine Arts Museum. The pots of the former and the baskets of the latter are properly displayed among the artifacts of the two tribes in the Museum of Natural History, possessed of no artistic significance—but that is not to say that they are without scientific meaning. I suppose there is no greater difference than in our placing Warhol's Brillo Box in the



...wood, 17 x 17 x 14 in. Photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt, Courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery.

sculpture wing of the same museum in which a "real" Brillo carton is exhibited in the Gallery of Industrial Design.

We are now to imagine that the Natural History Museum has reconstituted, in the form of diorama, scenes of the daily life of Basket Folk and Pot People, of the sort that privileged school children have long been required to endure. We see plastic Africans amid the paraphernalia of tribal life, fishing with nets, cultivating meager gardens, erecting shelters, weaving simple textiles, nursing babies. A basket from the Basket Folk and a pot from the Pot People are given a kind of privileged place in their respective dioramas (they are on loan from the Primitive Wing for this purpose), standing apart, perhaps objects of rapt attention on the part of tribesmen garbed in the traditional regalia of Wise Persons. The guide explains to the children that the basket is considered a work of art by the Basket Folk, as the pot is so considered by the Pot People. Some rude child says she can see no difference at all between the basket that is a work of art in the Basket diorama and the baskets strewed about in the Pot diorama. The teacher says there is a difference, but if the child persists, pressing for the difference to be explained, the guide further explains that it is a matter for experts to decide.

It is in one sense a matter for experts to decide. Because of their striking resemblances, even a highly trained anthropologist is incapable of distinguishing between an artwork and an artifact from the region. But because there is a deep difference, reflected, inevitably, in the values of these objects when they come up for auction, it is important to avoid misclassifications wherever this can be done. And indeed it can be done. Let us suppose a trace element in the clayfields of the Pot People is absent from those of the Basket Folk, and that the grasses from which their respective baskets are woven derive from distinct subvarieties of the same variety of grass. By bombarding a pot with electrons, it is not at all difficult to tell when we have a Basket or a Pot pot, or even when we have a fake Pot pot, many of which have begun to turn up, expectedly so in view of the keen interest in collecting Primitive art. And a skilled botanist with a speciality in African grasses has a problem though not an insurmountable problem in distinguishing between the relevant subvarieties. We can tell this to the rude child, if she really has to know. But if she has, as I hope she has, a philosophical mind, she will respond that she grants these differences, which in the end bear little upon her question. Her question was whether the conceded differences are the significant ones. It is inconceivable that a trace of some rare earth is what makes the difference between a work of art and a mere artifact. It is inconceivable to her that the grasses of one sub-variety weave into a work of art while their nearly indistinguishable conspecific grasses achieve no comparable transformation when woven into baskets that look just like the artworks.

The rude child allows that it is important to distinguish fakes from real things. Lately, she has read, it has become possible to tell a genuine Gutenberg Bible from a clever forgery by virtue of different X-ray spectra reduced by proton-bombardment of the inks, which have different chemical compositions. To be sure, the biblical message is the same—you cannot forge the Bible! But it makes a difference, difficult to analyze as it is, whether one is looking at a fifteenth century object, from the dawn of the use of movable type, or at something that pretends to be that, but is in fact the fabrication of a crook. This is not the same as the problem of discriminating artifacts from works of art —the Realm of Absolute Spirit cannot be segregated from the Prose of the World by proton-bombardment, chemical traces, vegetable differentia. So how is the difference to be detected?

It is important to the understanding of this problem that objects outwardly similar should be conceived of as so similar that it is impossible, or nearly impossible, to make the distinction on the basis of looks. It is also important that scientific criteria, of the sort we just have mentioned, while they may make a difference, make it in ways not relevant to the differences that concern us. It would be a philosophical farce were someone to tell us that he could tell when something was a Brillo Box by Warhol by testing a fleck of the paint, thinking this told us why his Brillo Boxes were *art*. So let us drop such differences, even if they are there, and insist that if the problem could be solved by appealing to such differences as these it would not be the problem that it is. The distinction between works of art and artifacts, like the difference between works of art and simply natural objects, is unlike the differences that separate one artifact from another, or one natural object from another. Imagining things that you cannot tell apart dramatizes the difference between these differences. It would not be the kind of difference we want if it could be determined easily, or even with difficulty, where the difference lies by means of a physical inspection of the objects.

The distinction between artifact and art is not lexically marked in the vocabularies of African languages generally. Neither is it marked in the languages of our pair of imagined tribes. The absence of lexical markers can hardly be taken as evidence that the distinction cannot be made or that it is not made in the linguistic community in question. Some years back a school of philosophical practice prevailed at Oxford under the label "Ordinary Language Philosophy." Its leader was J.L. Austin, who wrote, in a famous paper, "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations: they surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the longest test of survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all or-

inary and reasonably practical matters, than any you r I are likely to think of in our arm-chairs of an after- oon."[2] Austin and his followers, among whom were ome very sharp analysts, used the Oxford English)ictionary more or less as fundamentalists in Islam use ne Koran: as embodying, just as Austin said, all the listinctions worth making. For Socrates and Plato, no listinction was more worth making, more a matter of po- tical and moral urgency, than the distinction between rtifact and art, but ordinary Greek designated both as *ekne* while what we have latterly found it necessary to lesignate as "art-making" was called *poesis* among the Greeks, a word that designated *making* indifferently as o the product. And yet they made the distinction con- ceptually and in practice: the lexical lacuna did not con- strain the Greeks to draw no distinction whatever be- ween the fine and practical or applied arts, as I shall show in a moment. In a lexically rich language like Eng- ish, it may be true that when we need a distinction we 'egister it in our vocabulary. But that may be one of the things that sets us off as a culture.

Visitors to the Barnes Collection outside Philadelphia notice that among the masterpieces of painting and sculpture Barnes collected—or amassed—there are dis- played, between the paintings and on the walls, all manner of ironwork—hasps and hinges and doorbolts and intricate examples of the locksmith's art—in a di- dactic presentation of a favorite thesis of Barnes, and his mentor John Dewey: that the distinction between craft and art is sufficiently weak and elastic that—as we might say—a case can be made that David Smith and the blacksmith are bent upon the same exercise. A cer- tain formalist aesthetic, quite as much as a pragmatist aesthetic, can lead to a parallel conclusion: if one treats what we call "art" as a matter of formal design, there are no grounds for excluding, and very good grounds indeed for including, among the displays of the Museum of Modern Art, items like toasters and mixers and heli- copters, which on that level are not to be distinguished from works by Matisse or Malevich or Mondrian, or the mounting of an exhibition of Shaker design at the Whit- ney Museum of American Art. Now I am not denying that Shaker furniture may be art—it perhaps has as great a claim to that status as the pots of the Pot People or the baskets of the Basket Folk—but if it has, it is not on the grounds of high design, granted that it has de- sign and that the Shakers may enlist criteria of austere design in identifying something in their culture as a work of art. But the Greeks were neither pragmatists nor for- malists, and questions of design did not figure promi- nently in the philosophical discussions of what, to be sure, they had no term to designate as art, in contradis- tinction to mere craftwork. Notwithstanding this terminol- ogical circumstance, Socrates was able to draw upon beliefs and attitudes which formed part of the common conceptual scheme of his auditors when he wished to make a point that depended upon that distinction. There just is a failure of perfect fit between the conceptual scheme and the vocabulary of Greek, or perhaps any culture. Socrates' procedures of conceptual differentia- tion offer a good model to follow in a parallel investiga- tion into African philosophies of art and aesthetics.

Artists, in Greece, were considered inspired. It was very much as though they were vessels for an alien power, media through which or whom the Muses spoke, almost as though the artists were themselves mere pas- sive receivers and amplifiers of communication from a space other than their own. In the dialogue *The Ion*, the character after whom the text is named is a rhapsode, a professional reciter of poetry at festivals. Ion, the rhap- sode, confesses to inspiration, claiming that he really has no idea what happens to him when the words of Homer come through his mouth to such great effect upon his hearers. This view of inspiration remains an element in *our* theories of artistic creation, where we draw a crucial distinction between something as willed and something inspired. It was not only the High Ro- mantics who made this distinction. The notion of genius, especially artistic genius, has always rested upon it. The genius, in effect, is in touch with high powers, holding hands, as a poet I know likes to say, with the Muses.

Socrates makes a great deal of Ion's incapacity to say how he does what he does. He acknowledges Ion's genius, but at the same time diminishes it by insisting, what Ion in any case will admit, that he lacks knowl- edge. He was not taught and he cannot teach what he is so good at, and this has been regarded as the attrib- ute of genius in the deepest discussion of the concept in modern times, namely in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. "Since learning is nothing but imitation," Kant writes, "it follows that the greatest ability and teachableness qua teachableness cannot avail for genius."

> We cannot learn to write spirited poetry, however express may be the precepts of the art and how- ever excellent its models. A Homer or a Wieland cannot show how his ideas, so rich in fancy and yet so full of thought, come together in his head, simply because he does not know and therefore cannot teach others . . . Artistic skill cannot be communi- cated; it is imparted to every artist immediately by the hand of nature; and so it dies with him, until na- ture endows another in the same way, so that he only needs an example in order to put into opera- tion in a similar fashion the talent of which he is conscious.[3]

An incapacity to learn and teach, being a mark, as it were, of what makes a person a true artist, inevitably disqualifies him from doing what the Greek expected artists, and especially poets, to do, namely to instruct the youth of the culture. To be sure, Socrates is being especially disingenuous in this criticism—as Plato was being especially disingenuous in using Ion as the para-

digm of the artist—largely because the poet was not expected to teach how to make poems or the sculptor how to carve figures. Rather, they were supposed to teach morals and right conduct—to teach virtue—and what they wrote or sang might be capable of doing that, even though they could not teach how to write or sing. Homer would remain a repository of important moral instruction, even though those who recited him could not say how they did that. Socrates may, on the other hand, have meant to imply that if the poets lacked knowledge of what they were good at—poetry making—then how could they be expected to have knowledge of matters in which they were not especially different from the rest of us?

Disingenuous or not, Socrates used artisans and craftsmen as his exemplars of those who do possess knowledge. Over and over, he appeals to the example of the carpenter, the shipwright, the doctor as paradigms of knowledge which can be taught and can be learned. For Socrates, in an important sense, *knowing* was knowing *how*, as opposed to theoretical knowledge, though theoretical knowledge too had a place, at least in Plato's system. For Plato, theoretical knowledge of the Good was something philosophers were capable of having, and only those with this theoretical knowledge then were capable of making the rules with which to run the state. The identity—that philosophers must be kings and kings philosophers—he famously proposed for his ideal society did not entail an identity between two kinds of knowledge, for they were distinct in his mind and in the common mind: Philosophers had theoretical knowledge while kings, like carpenters or navigators, had practical knowledge. The problem with artists was that in their capacity to make art they lacked both.

The term "art" in ordinary English retains a sense in which someone exercises *an* art in producing what we might as well class as artifacts. In this sense of the word, it is obvious that *an* art can be taught. In this usage, art is a set of skills, a set of rules which govern those skills and define them, and all this is transmitted from master to apprentice, father to son, mother to daughter. *An* art is then something one can practice in both senses of the latter term—the sense in which practice makes perfect, and the sense in which one is said to practice one's profession. "Every art," Kant wrote, "presupposes rules by means of which in the first instance a product, if it be represented as artistic, is represented as possible."[4] But art, as contrasted with "*an* art", is characterized precisely by the absence of rules for its production. Genius is the gift of functioning where there are no rules, or where the rules are in abeyance, or in defiance of what one believed were the rules. We speak now and then of "lost arts." And we may try to rediscover what the rules were for producing enamels as the Byzantines made them or Damascus steel, or medieval stained glass. The way John Singer Sargent could, with a single stroke, lay down a body color, a highlight, and a shadow, is a nearly lost art, though Sargent used to demonstrate how it could be done. We assume that if we rediscovered the rules, we could in principle make the products, as if by recipes for cooking. But it would be a kind of joke to say that Homeric poesis or Mozart's music-making is a lost art: those gifts died with the artists, and the most that can be logically achieved is imitation of their styles or performance of their work.

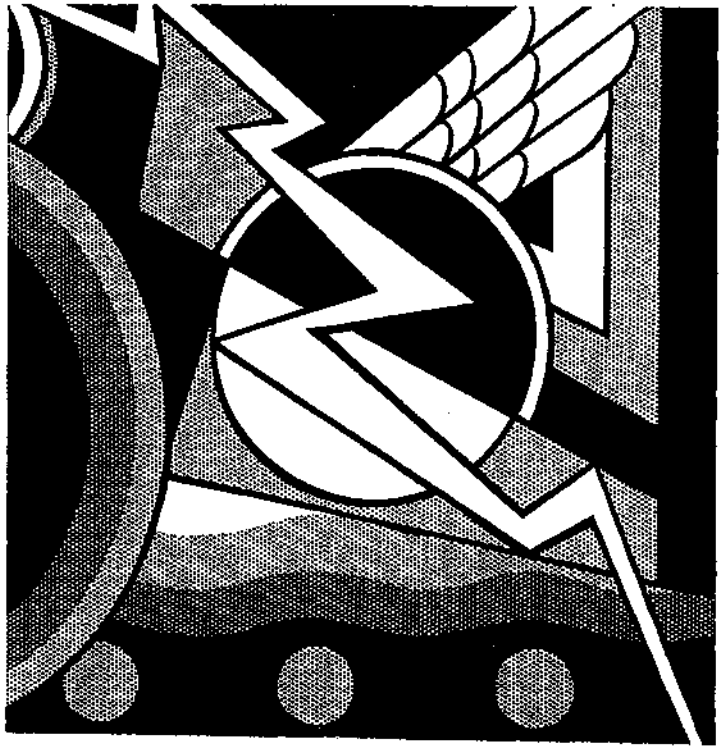
There is another dimension to the distinction, one not used by the Greeks, so far as I know, but certainly accessible to their understanding. Artifacts have primarily the status of tools, of instruments or at least of objects of use. (The contemporary concept of *craft* builds upon this in the sense that craftspersons produce things that primarily have uses, like pots and dishes and quilts and glassware.) The philosopher Martin Heidegger observed that tools form systems, so that any given tool is defined with respect to the remaining tools in a systematic totality that *Zeugganzes*—a totality of tools.[5] Thus the hammer refers to the nail and the nail to the boards and the board to the saw and the adze—and these to the whetstone. Heidegger contends that such an inter-referential system arises as a totality, though admittedly it may be refined over time: one cannot have invented, so to speak, *just* the nail. I once imagined someone discovering among the tombs of the Etruscans a bronze spool-like object wound round by a fine linen ribbon, blackened by charcoal. To understand this object is to imagine a system of objects into which it fits. It would be absurd to say that the Etruscans had invented—that they anticipated—the typewriter ribbon. To have the typewriter ribbon requires one first have the typewriter, hence ink, paper, a notational system, the idea of movable type—instrumentalities quite beyond the Etruscans whose technologies sufficed, and indeed defined, the forms of life they lived. Heidegger insists as well that a *Zeugganzes* also falls away as a totality. Thus a society would not just lose its arrows. They go only when the bow goes, the quiver goes, the apparatus for fashioning arrowheads disappears, or when the entire system is displaced as a totality by a new technology, like firearms, after which archery is practiced as an atavism, or ritualistically, or as a form of athletics.

Works of art can have a secondary identity as components in a *Zeugganzes*, as objects of use—like the baskets of the Basket Folk or the pots of the Pot People. Their uses may even form the basis for their being works of art, since their metaphorical meanings may spring from their uses, absorbed into a system of beliefs and symbols that constitute a kind of philosophy. In their capacity as works of art they belong to a different totality altogether than that to which they belong as objects of use. The hasps and hinges of the Barnes collection were wrenched from the system that gave them a use and nailed to the gallery wall, where we then could admire them as if they were works of pure design. Something of this may be true of paintings, such as al-

tarpieces, where perhaps they did more in their original locations than subserve a program of decoration. We may admire them for their "art"—for the sheer craft that goes into them or for their design. But that is not what makes them *works* of art.

Perhaps throughout art history, until very recent times, artworks enjoyed double identities, both as objects of use and praxis, and as vessels of spirit and meaning. There is in contemporary attitudes toward art an assumption of placelessness, that it cannot be art if it has a use. Dewey and Barnes may have been challenging that in weakening the distinction between high and practical art—or in trying to conceive of high art as having something to do, instrumentalistically. "What praise is implied in the simple epithet *useful*!" Hume wrote in his essay on morals. "What reproach in the contrary!"[6] In contemporary society it is very difficult to see or say what art does apart from being art. And our museums reflect this attitude, thrusting the work forward against blank walls in closed galleries under cruel illumination, asking only our response, not as part of anything but as consummatory and self-contained presences. The artist Lee Lorentz wrote me, regarding Primitive art, "I think we are closer to understanding the role these objects play in Primitive cultures than we are to understanding what role 'art' plays in ours." One does not want to make placelessness one of the defining attributes of art for such a definition would disenfranchise as art the artworks of Primitive cultures. In their own societies these works have a place, but it would not be the *kind* of place they have in the *Zeugganzes* in their dimensions as tools in a system of tools. The important point is that the whole practical life of those societies could go forward if the society in fact had no works of art, granted that, as in Greek or Christian practices, works of art play roles in rituals that are believed to have practical efficacies. That is what Hegel meant in saying that, as art, an object is not part of the Prose of the World but belongs instead to the sphere of Absolute Spirit. This is as true of artworks in Primitive cultures as of those in our own. It is only, perhaps, that we lack the robust sense of Absolute Spirit, Hegel and the Wise Persons of Primitive cultures share.

An artifact implies a system of means; to extract it from the system in which it has a function and display it for itself is to treat a means as though it were an end. The use of an artifact is its meaning. There are systems of social organization in which human beings are treated, and indeed consider themselves as means (as in slavery), but against these there is a moral theory according to which human beings are to be treated as ends rather than as means. And artworks have, by contrast with artifacts, some of the structure human beings are supposed philosophically to possess in virtue of which it is an abuse, a moral abuse, to seek to reduce them to the status of means and to disregard those components of their being through which they have

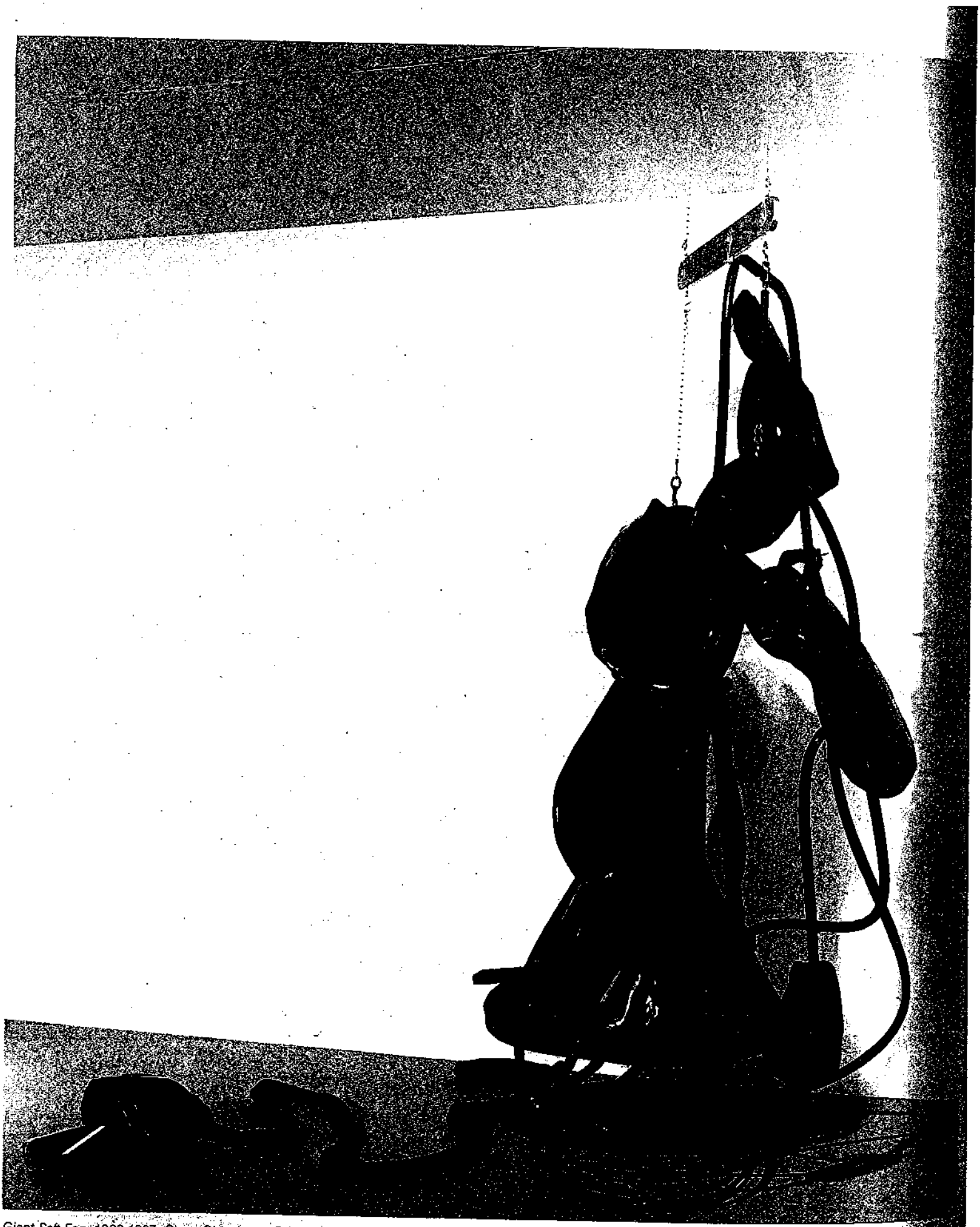


Modern Painting with Bolt, 1966. Roy Lichtenstein. Synthetic polymer paint and oil partly silkscreened on canvas, 68 ¼ x 68 ⅜ in. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. Gift to The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

dignity and worth. Let me very schematically outline at least one basis for approaching works of art through this somewhat portentous analogy.

In a famous discourse on the relationship of mind to body, Wittgenstein said that the human body is the best picture we have of the human mind.[7] He implied that mental states are no more than the bodily dispositions on the basis of which we ascribe particular mental states to humans, but he also implied that to be human is to be a mind embodied: a picture of the body is a picture of the mind when we regard ourselves as embodied minds or souls. A similar account of the relationship of bodily form to mental states is found in Hegel's discussion of classical Greek art, and most particularly classical Greek sculpture, in which we find, according to Hegel, the perfect wedding of form and meaning.[8] In sculpture of this order, the work of art gives material embodiment to a kind of spiritual content or, as Hegel would put it, a sort of idea. Art, in his view, belongs to the domain of thought, and its role is to reveal truth by material or, as he would say, sensuous means. So the material object that is an artwork is the best picture we can have of the meaning it expresses.

In this, I believe, Hegel articulated a thesis that the Greeks themselves would have endorsed, even if they in fact had no lexical way of distinguishing artworks from artifacts. For the Greeks, the artist revealed thought in the work of art, and the artist's passivity in regard to this was perhaps evidence for the *objective* truth of the thought that he expressed. Socrates, of course, anxious at every point to discredit the artist, whom he regarded as a rival with the philosopher, drew specific attention to the mimetic treacheries of works of art, and hence their power to give rise to false beliefs in



Giant Soft Fan, 1966-1967. Claus Oldenburg. Construction of vinyl filled with foam rubber, wood, metal, and plastic tubing; fan, 10 ft. x 58 ⅞ in. x 61 ⅛ in. ble; plus cord and cord 23 ft. 3 ½ in. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, Gift to The Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

their viewers. But the overwhelming consensus was that artists are vehicles of truth which they have the gift of embodying in works of art. The problem then was not really to distinguish art from artifact, but from philosophy or from history, which would be its natural kin. And Aristotle, in a well-known passage in the *Poetics*, argued that poetry, even if outwardly similar to history in certain cases (as the *Iliad*), is more universal than history, and hence closer to philosophy than Socrates would have allowed. But it would have been baffling were someone to say such things about knives or nets or hairpins, objects whose meaning is exhausted in their utility. Universality belongs after all to thoughts or propositions, and no one would have supposed knives or nets or hairpins to express universal content. They are what they are used for, but artworks have some higher role, putting us in touch with higher realities; they are defined through their possession of meaning. They are to be explained through what they express. Before the work of art we are in the presence of something we can grasp only through it, much as only through the medium of bodily actions can we have access to the mind of another person.

I am making these somewhat sweeping comparisons chiefly to emphasize that the concepts of art and artifact are connected in the cultural intelligence of the Greeks, and that we have access to these concepts by penetrating that complex and seeing, for example, what concepts are connected with art but not with artifact. Art and artifact, in Greek culture, connect deeply with the concepts of knowledge, morality, rules, meaning, practice, form, truth, illusion, universality, thought, activity, passivity, and embodiment.

Philosophers have tended to address the problem of Other Cultures on the model of constructing a lexicon, and seeing the degree to which cross-cultural synonomy can be achieved through term-by-term pairings with our own language. This reveals the usual philosophical prejudices in semantical theory, that meaning is a matter of reference and that words mean what they refer to. If we cannot fix reference, we cannot fix meaning, and if meaning escapes us the Other Culture—or the Other Mind for that matter —is an impenetrable mystery. But this is really not the way to get into the minds the cultures shape. It is again through a system of philosophical thought that we must construct the questionnaires that are to take us into the other culture, and through which the contours of a concept will gradually reveal themselves and a map of the mind can be made. It is in this way, rather than by seeking references for the terms of their language, that we find out which are the artworks. The reference-class of *tekne* will give us a pool of artworks and artifacts, leading us to suppose that the Greeks drew no distinction between hammers or fishnets and statues and epics. But in any case, the criteria through which perception allows us to pick things out will not greatly help in identifying works of art when, as in the case of the two tribes we considered, the artifact of one might look exactly like the artwork of another. What makes the one an artwork is the fact that, just as a human action gives embodiment to a thought, the artwork embodies something we could not conceptualize without the material object which conveys its soul.

My sense is that the philosophical structure of African artworks is the same as the philosophical structure of artworks in any culture. If a human being is a compound in relationships of spirit and body that keep philosophers tossing sleeplessly in their beds, an artwork is a compound of thought and matter. The material thing makes the thought. What makes the artworks of Africa different from those of Greece are the hidden things they embody or make objective, giving them a presence in the lives of men and women. The works have a power artifacts could not possibly have because of the spiritual content they embody. An artifact is shaped by its function, but the shape of an artwork is given by its content. The forms of African art are powerful because the ideas they express are ideas about power, or perhaps what they express are the powers themselves. For the Greeks, thoughts were not merely representations of things. Thoughts were powerful; they believed Reason was the power that drove the world. Because reason was power and men were rational —were *reason incarnate*—it is hardly to be wondered that the human form was the subject of art in its highest achievements. I do not believe Africans have this metaphysics of Reason. For them the powers are not those of Reason but of something else, and human beings embody powers that may be given vivid identification in works of art.

The powers of fertility drive men and women together but our couplings do not express or embody the power of fertility—they simply are explained by the power that drives us. The breasts of a woman do not express the power of nourishment—breasts are not works of art—but are the organs through which nourishment is realized. The powers expressed in African sculpture are powers central to human life, and sculptures express those powers exactly as the statues of Greek Gods express the powers the Gods themselves personify. Greek statues express those powers less successfully than the sculptures of Africa because they look so much like men and women, if somewhat idealized, that they almost could be taken as portraits of actual men and women. Their expressive power is diminished because of the mimesis Socrates (and Aristotle) took as their essence. Actual men and women served as models for them; so much do they resemble their models that resemblance got mistakenly to be believed as the definition of art, and the eye became the arbiter of artistic excellence and opticality the criterion of artistic structure.

Resemblance is not a consideration in African art, which gives the African artist the license and power to invent the forms that best embody the forces he means to express. An immense head or an immense phallus i

in no sense a distortion, since resemblance is not a criterion. The task, rather, is to find the form that makes the force objective or visible, using, perhaps, the relevant bodily parts of men and women or of animals as natural metaphors. It is the powers that define the forms, and the gift of the artist is to grasp what the powers require in order to be given sensuous expression in a way that we humans can know them.

If a Western artist, inspired by African models, introduces such features into his work they really will be distortions, just because resemblance counts significantly in Western art, even when flaunted. Resemblance is what makes flaunting a possible program. Whatever Picasso got from the dusty vitrines of the ethnographic museum, in *his* work they were distortions and perceived as such. David Hockney once told me that he believed there is no such thing as distortion, and while I think him wrong in general, he is right about African art, where there are no distortions. To appreciate African sculptures for their distortion is accordingly to fail to appreciate them at all. To be sure, we may therefore be unable to perceive them at all. If we do not know the powers, if we do not understand how those powers are lived in the forms of life they penetrate, and especially if we ourselves do not live those forms of life, we probably can see them *only* in our own terms. Or: to think that the right way to be related to them is through seeing is not to see them on their own terms at all. But opticality penetrates our consciousness of art so deeply that we perhaps have no access to African artworks save through our eyes. And so we prize them for their aesthetic qualities rather than for their philosophical ones. The space of the museum is perhaps an optical and an aesthetic space, and there is a deep question of whether exhibition or display is appropriate to these objects. But that is not a question I want to pursue here.

Because of how they appear to the sensitive eye, because of aesthetic similarities to works of art from our own traditions, it is inevitable perhaps that we should come to see, as works of art, objects that do not enjoy that status in the societies they come from. If these were artifacts there, they are artifacts here, whatever outward similarities they may bear to what have come to be works of art in our own culture. To be a work of art, I have argued, is to embody a thought, to have a content, to express a meaning, and so the works of art that outwardly resemble Primitive artifacts embody thoughts, have contents, express meanings though the objects they resemble do not. These objects may indeed be Primitive, in the sense that, adequate as they may be for the purposes of the societies that use them, they are further back or further down in the scale of technological evolution than their counterparts in our own technology. They may have no use, in fact, in a more evolved society. But they are no less Primitive because they may resemble very advanced works of art in our own culture. They are not works of art, and the resemblances are aesthetic illusions.

But in this sense of Primitive, the artworks from Primitive cultures are not primitive at all. There really is no ar more advanced than theirs, which may be the germ of truth in those relativisms that remain so tempting to philosophers of art. Their being what we might regard as Primitive people leading Primitive lives by means of Primitive artifacts does not make their art Primitive. And the fact that some of their artifacts should have come, through the restless drives of Western art, to resemble artworks of considerable sophistication no more makes those artifacts into works of art than it confers upon them that sophistication.[9]

Notes

1. Roger Fry, "Negro Sculpture" in *Vision and Design* (London, 1920).

2. J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, eds., *J.L. Austin: Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 130.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* , trans. J.H. Bernard, par. 47.

4. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, par. 46.

5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), passim.

6. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section II ("On Benevolence.").

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* , Eng. ed., trans G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), II, iv, p. 178.

8. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), Vol. I, pp. 427–438; Vol. II, pp 721ff.

9. This essay carries forward, and presupposes, a general line of philosophical analysis which, in its application to the philosophy of art, may be found in my *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982) and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).