

**The Question before us:
What are the potentials and limitations of
social analysis of art?**

DRAFT

Word count: 3740

Sensory urbanism, geometric lines, gesticulating persons - art and perception - these are all themes taken up by Lucas (2008) and Ingold (2007) and others - that will be presented¹. In his book **Making: anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture** (2010), Ingold approaches the study of these disciplines - probing, contemplating and describing the domains of life that we inhabit - and the ways we perceive them. In **Lines: a Brief History** (2007) Ingold suggests that anthropology is about exploring the production and significance of lines. As gesturing and emoting creatures we take steps, and human beings form lines. Ray Lucas, architect and University of Manchester Professor, adds to this way of 'seeing things' with a 'sensory urbanism' concept. This semester he provided an illuminating drawing workshop on the connections between the social production of architecture and graphic anthropology². For my essay I press further to be able to include 'the outside' and urban street-art, into the discussion. Street-art drawing³ may be 'gesturing something' as well, and producing its own 'line', and this is an appropriate start to the question - What Are The Potentials And Limitations Of Social Analysis Of Art? #8. The street-artist, Banksy⁴ is a backdrop for this essay. Best known for his murals on a cement wall, his work is easy to spot. The elusive Banksy, himself, remains anonymous, but is well known to provoke a second look and thought about the injustices in the world.⁵

¹ Through this aspect we see drawing relevant to the field of anthropology.

² e.g. Lucas showed colourful drawings of carts seen as objects of art and - 'orthographic drawing as organized perception' (street carts are used sell goods in a profoundly 'social' markets in Nandoemun Market in Seoul Korea, 'aesthetic enthusiasm' and heightened awareness for 'the intentionality of aesthetics'. Orthographic-projection is a means of representing three-dimensional object in two dimensions.



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"The Jungle" - BANKSY - location: Refugee camp, Calais France - a Steve Jobs mural

⁴ Banksy says, in **Wall and piece** (2006), an anthology of his popular work, "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable".

⁵ Bull, M (2009) **Banksy locations**; Shove, G. (2012) **Banksy: You are an acceptable level of threat**

We will travel through a discussion from age-old tribal artefacts⁶ to a discussion about engaging today's human in anthropology. In highlighting a genre of street-art⁷ - originating in the cold, outdoors - on the ground, on a cement wall, beside a train - we can appreciate the ways in which Ingold challenges us to envision what *can be seen* as valid, anthropological inquiry. It will begin to make sense that we would want to touch⁸ the terrain⁹ upon which Banksy's sensory urbanism¹⁰ has been observed in cosmopolitan city streets. **Art and agency: an anthropological theory** (1998) by Alfred Gell, is a vital text on the potentials because it is a proposal for an 'anthropology of art' and forwards the notion of art being seen as a mode of action - an agent of influence and even social change. Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist, delivered a classic ethnography of contemporary France entitled **Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste** (1984). His text must be a vital part of any discussion on the limitations which social analysis of art might seek to offer, since he argues that no judgement of taste is innocent. Instead it is fraught with classism.¹¹

The essay looks at the idea of the social analysis of art, in general, whether that art emerges from the cosmopolitan street, commissioned by elites in Bourgeois-society (Bourdieu, 1964), or non-western tribes of old (Gell, 1998). Humans make things to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Bourdieu looks at bourgeois French taste. Gell looks at the 'agency of art' and its

⁶ Several anthropological texts will be presented.

⁷ **Street art: The graffiti revolution** (2008) by Cedar Lewisohn features a discussion of graffiti, stickers, stencil art, and wheat-pasting. Covering the graffiti-writing tradition of the 1980s through the work of artists such as Banksy and Futura 2000, he argues that street-art is now a global phenomenon. The book also features interviews with the figures associated with street art over the last three decades, including Lady Pink, Barry McGee, Shepard Fairey, Futura 2000, Malcolm McLaren, Miss Van, and Os Gemeos.

⁸ Classen, 2012 says touch has cultural history. Touch, as method, features in an Anthropology of the Senses, with its specific epistemology. Sensory description, conveying meaning, is presented through each of the senses as a central feature of its method.

⁹ Classen 1997, says perception is not solely a physical response. Perception is bound-up socially and culturally. It has a sociality. She affirms "a sensory model" as a cultural and historical formation. Taking up sensory experience as a valid place of inquiry involves weaving theoretical analysis with ethnographies describing what is emerging from the senses. (Jackson, 1983 and others Stoller, 1989, 1997; Taussig, 1993)

¹⁰ Lucas, 2008 (see bibliography) *Sensory Urbanism* proceedings 2008 [conference held]

¹¹ Classism: the term as meaning a class dictated choice; aesthetic preference influenced by social mores.

'artefacts', which are drawn on several artistic traditions including European, Indian, Polynesian, Melanesian, and Australian.

Gell argues that art is active and is a player in the making of history - a form of instrumental action. Art objects embody complex intentionalities and possess social agency. The interpretation of meaning matters. Visual art is his main focus. Based on a perspective, "Many art historians, not to mention artists, are aghast by what social scientists say about art, by its crude reductivism and ignorance. Social analysis so frequently misses the mark, and in trying to explain, simply explains away. Often, art historians have far more interesting things to say. What can anthropology do here?"¹² Gell proposes a definition of art as a complex system of intentionality where artists produce art objects to effect changes in the world, including (but not restricted to) changes in the aesthetic perceptions of art viewers. Pointing out that there is always a psychology of patterns and perceptions to consider, art speaks to constructions of self and the control of knowledge¹³. He questions the criteria that accords art status only to a certain class of objects.

Art selection is but a reflection of strategies of social pretension. Bourdieu expounds on the root of social preference. Not all art is a spirit of resistance. He critiques the aesthetic preferences of the Petit Bourgeoisie in France by framing them within a multitude of social factors that, he says, play a determinative part in the French choices of, for example, art, house décor, furniture, and high-fashion, which are *allegedly* reflecting a 'matter of taste'. The aesthetic choices a Bourgeois makes are but distinctions - pretensions - and judgements made in opposition to those made by other classes. Taste¹⁴ is not pure, says Bourdieu. He finds a world of social meaning in the decision to *order* certain kinds of art. The social world, he argues, functions in parallel as a system of power relations in which fickle distinctions of taste become standard social judgement.

¹² Direct quote from our class reading list for Anthropology: Art and Perception, Autumn, 2015.

¹³ According to Davis in **Art's Agency and Art History**(2007), ed. Robin Osborne & Jeremy Tanner, Gell stresses "the importance of the beliefs of [what he calls] 'the recipients' of works of art" (p.199). The agency believed to be agent-caused properties of artefacts. He coins the terms 'art nexus' and 'art index' and power to appropriate, 'to abduct the identity', of those who constitute the art.

¹⁴ Bourdieu speaks of "cultural pedigree" (p.63), "class condition and social conditioning" (p.101), "The habitus and the space of life-styles" (p.169), and "indicators of economic capital in different fractions of the dominant class" (p.117).

A solution or approach in response to the limitations of a social analysis of art, is this. Visual anthropology is a quickly growing subfield of social anthropology. **Visual impact: culture and the meaning of images** (2008) by Terence Wright, talks about photography, film, painting and drawing and new-media, as practices of visual representation. By considering the techniques and systems that inform visual displays, Wright explores how cultural values and traditions shape particular visual styles.

Visual Anthropology opens the anthropological study of photographs, paintings, tattoos, sculptures, cave drawings, hieroglyphics, museum archives and artefacts - all examples of visual representations¹⁵ and ethnographic-subject worthy. The case for street-art, worthy of visual-anthropology, study is harder to make¹⁶.

Wright's thesis is that pictures and images provide a cognitive context through which people can explore and understand their world. Visual mediums frame and shape daily life. Since the category is already recognized, [the genre of new-media], the case is made that street-art can be included as a subject for anthropological fieldwork.

As a visual form, street-art is literally, outdoors. It is outside of the studio, commercial gallery system, and often the law. What one might think of as an artist's 'canvas' turns onto the side of a cement wall, the pillars of an old bridge or the side of a parked train. We might wish to ask what is the function of drawing on cement, outside? What meaning does that convey?

It is relevant to note that the street-artist draws and paints outside of social convention. Street-art has something to say about society and what it means to be a human in a clearly class stratified society. Visual anthropology, applied

¹⁵ Performance art (such as dance) is another example, both as an art-form and a possible subject of ethnography. Performance art, I argue, can include e.g. Banksy's performance-art shows particularly in New York City; his mobile installations, Siren of the Lambs ; Fresh Meat Truck.

¹⁶ **Global street art : the street artists and trends taking over the world (2014)** by Lee Bofkin features examples of street-art that have been observed on e.g. on the wall of an abandoned factory in the outskirts of Lisbon, a New York bridge or a passenger train in Rome. Locations and styles are defined with specific meanings common to these genres: USA, Europe/UK, South America, and Rest of the World Techniques. Themes include: *Animals, Hip-hop Characters, Robots, Ad-busting, Activism*. Styles include: *Graf/Letters, Freehand Spraycan, Stencil, Stickers and Posters, Atypical Techniques, Durable Techniques, and Ephemeral Techniques*. Genres include: *Alluding to 3D, Anamorphism, Photorealism, Text Work, Calligraphy, Geometry*.

to street-art, has the ability to look at image-making in an historical and global context and would use it as a window for exploring the human condition at a deeper level. Bourdieu's *distinction* could be applied here: street-art is non-Bourgeois art.

More than a century ago, the field of the anthropology of art turned to ethnography as the main source from which anthropological thought emerged, and we have been able to learn from notable anthropologists who have taken visual aesthetic systems as their object of study. This has brought forward insights into constructions of self and the human experience.

Franz Boas, a pioneering anthropologist performed field studies on art and his book, **Primitive Art** (1927) evaluated what were called 'primitive' art forms of the Northwest Pacific Coast (i.e. the discovered Aboriginal Arts at the time). In his book **The Way of the Masks** (1982), the renowned Claude Lévi-Strauss enhances on Boas' explorations, observing and recording changes in the plastic form of Aboriginal masks in relation to the changing patterns in interaction among Pacific Coast First Peoples.

Clifford Geertz' influential writing of "Art as a Cultural System", in **Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology** (1983), captures the above anthropological history and the highlighting of local knowledge. He posits that art is a cultural system, deepening an understanding of human societies through the intricacies of local knowledge, i.e. 'from the native's point of view' - art and aboriginal knowledge. The symbolics of power (e.g. Geertz' notion of the 'Charisma of Kings') is reflected in the nature of anthropological understanding, toward what Geertz' calls an 'ethnology of modern thought'.

Boas' **Primitive Art**, Claude Lévi-Strauss' **The Way of the Masks** (1982) or Geertz's "Art as Cultural System " (1983), attempted to approach an anthropology of art as an endeavour in the study of 'aesthetics' within certain indigenous social and cultural settings. But what are as artefacts today were not necessarily seen as such at the time the aesthetic objects were produced. Observing indigenous ceremonies is part of Anthropology's history. It goes without saying that a single, cross-cultural, definition of 'art' or 'anthropology of art' has really never been established, in anthropology, even if commonality of patterns may have been initially sought. Boas' field studies were about recording formal features and designs that were observed in the objects of art, having certain obvious recordable 'aesthetic' qualities.

Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics (1992), ed. Coote and Shelton, highlights the aesthetic dimensions in non-Western art forms, defined as 'tribal art'. "The Western categories of 'painting', 'sculpture', or 'literature' need not be transferred over in non-Western contexts."¹⁷

Contemporary art and anthropology (2006) edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, opens up the touchy subject of representation, saying that anthropology of art has focused on the interpretation of tribal artefacts and not what these representations have to say about the 'lookers', or what the 'looked-at' may have been making and presenting about themselves. By way of example the contemporary art scene that suggests new, representational practices, has been met with deaf ears. Importantly, the book mentions a reluctance, that exists within anthropology, to seek and find alternative motifs of research, presentation and exhibition. Artists and anthropologists can learn from each other's representational practices. It flows from this, that collaborative efforts¹⁸ could be better sustained.

Anthropology, art and cultural production (2007) by Marusska Svasek, provides an overview of various anthropological theories of art. She defines art as a social process - not only the artefacts themselves and the values attributed to them, but also the process of production and its wider context. She discusses commoditisation and explores the process of collecting and exhibiting art works and how this relates to art's distribution and consumption in a global market.

In **Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description** (2011), Ingold makes the case that life has been stamped out. His argument is that the actual lived-experience of life could better be echoed in Anthropology; not just a lifeless thing, or an exclusive output of structuralism of patterns, codes or systems.

In Ingold's **Lines: a Brief History** (2007), he creates an anthropological archaeology of the line. His interests are speech and song in the cultures of

¹⁷ According to reading list: "the study of European art (Western) aesthetic tradition has been dominated by art history, largely a product of German romanticism. Anthropology has the same origins, but travelled in another direction" - i.e observing, collecting artefacts and studying indigenous peoples, as the above brief discussion illuminates.

¹⁸ In class, we explored the idea surrounding the western approach to art as representations of individual creative impulses, and also that creativity and perception grows out of social relations.

Papua New Guinea, the Navaho and Meso America, in this particular book. Creating pathways, drawing maps, writing and calligraphy are examples of 'things artistic'. Ingold, providing seventy illustrations, and a revitalization of sketching as a way of 'looking' and 'seeing' movement - in a very real sense, connecting the world.

I say art is a series of physical lines emanating from the metaphorical lines of the human spirit. It sounds like a line, because it is a line. Art can speak of metaphor, which must matter to anthropology, because it gestures something, illustrates 'temporality' (Lucas, 2008), a hesitation, an extra pencil stroke - and what it means to be human. Ingold makes drawing important to anthropology. In part because he is putting down on paper an emphasis on nature and the simplicity of the beauty of living. We must reframe a question which starts 'up there in the cloud atmosphere' and we must begin in grounded actuality. The world is full of entangled lines - lines crossing over each, lines connected, lines broken.

Tim Ingold's **The Life of Lines** (2015), is his most recent work, which evolves from his preceding book, **Lines: A Brief History** (2007), with the thesis of the valley of life emerging from a series of knots, as opposed to blocks. The concept of knotting, he says, applies not only in our walls and buildings but onto the ground itself; for example one only has to observe the roots of trees penetrating the ground. To understand living lines, says Ingold, one has to look to studying weather.

He extrapolates a line to make his 'linealogy' theory, making visible the observational powers and artistic expressions of what makes us, thinking persons. A 'meteorology' must be sufficiently descriptive of all that is life - humans in their wanderings; both mental and physical. Whether [Weather] it is our sense of being, hearing, remembering, appreciating aesthetics, or contemplating the sky - these are all things that make up the 'atmosphere' of the human life. We must continue to communicate to keep the lines open. It is this imperative of corresponding that makes us both social (as opposed to a-social) - humans. How, then, should this affect our perception of street-art?

Over the last 50 years, street-art [drawings] has morphed from being seen as the problem of a transient daubing graffiti, to something representing a distinct art form. There are now festivals celebrating street artists 'in the

scene'¹⁹. We have all likely heard the clichés. An urban street artist may have certain psychological leanings and/or political motivations. Not every artist cuts off an ear. So when does the object of art acquire the anthropological idea of 'meaning' or new meaning as a mode of action? Who decides?

Street-art is usually described as being separate²⁰ from gallery-based art. Banksy's work appears in galleries, as well. (Bull, 2009). There has been criticism begrudging Banksy's art appearing in the Tate or New York's Metropolitan Museum - i.e. commercializing²¹. Should this criticism be refuted as the invalid spew of anarchists?

The concept of a high-society art-world even being interested in the work of a street-artist - 'vandal?'²² - appearing in galleries, is a curious one indeed. As if 'going native' i.e. 'using' the ideas of the raw human emotion of street-art and its 'primitive' character in new and innovative ways - just another line? There was a time when the contemporary art world ignored him completely.

Let's return now to the beginning theme of sensory urbanism, with which I started. The word 'street-scape' has now come into common parlance when referring to urban outdoor art. Is a refugee camp (with art) an anthropological base for ethnographic fieldwork?

Banksy's provocative mural can be touched²³ whilst gallery-art cannot. Is *The Jungle* a modern and recent artefact? Steve Jobs - on the cold wall - is a like living museum - it can be felt as can the meta-message on the cultural history

¹⁹ Some cities have even promoted murals to beautify their cities, now referred to as muralism. The curation of public space has traditionally been accepted to belong in the hands of city councils and urban planners. But street-art has had a way of changing the appearance of our cities. One only has to think of London or New York City to observe this trend.

²⁰ Banksy donated to the Housing Works Organization in New York City, a piece which was auctioned-off for the benefit of the homeless living with HIV, for \$615,000. This brings up Gell's art index concept.

²¹ Here too there is always a flipside. An article in the London Telegraph on December 17, 2015 says Calais migrants are covering the art with a blanket and charging people to view Banksy's mural of Apple's Steve Jobs.

²² This is a label that has been assigned to Banksy by e.g. Bloomberg, NYC.

²³ Classen (2012) and Classen and Howes (1994) are part of a tradition of Anthropology of the senses. Touch, says Classen, is the deepest sense. A noticeable smell possesses a cultural history.

of the refugee crisis²⁴, reminding that one of the most successful and extraordinary entrepreneurs was a Syrian. The concrete will disintegrate eventually and 'Ingold's weather' will erase it.

The visual-art would have to be cut out to be preserved, some would like to argue. This would be not be unlike parts of the Berlin Wall, which appear in living memory in the Press Museum on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. However, commercially-speaking, however, Banksy's pre-gallery work (before 2003), is in a grey area.²⁵

Christopher Thompson made a recent film entitled *How to Sell a Banksy*, describing his experience and some of the surrounding politics he encountered. Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses have apparently agreed not to auction any of Banksy's street-art i.e 'not intended for resale and not having any paperwork'.

On the other hand, serious collectors would have to include the *pre-gallery* work - this is an argument that is being pushed to justify the appropriation of his *street-art* pieces.²⁶ The contemporary gallery art world inherited an art movement. The issue of a gallery profiting on the back of Banksy's notoriety as a urban street-artist - is thorny. Has Banksy allowed the-gallery to 'abduct his identity'. We need to reflect on Gell's thoughtful analysis.

As genres of art change, adapt and expand, along with social mores, so must the demands and expressions of anthropological discourse adapt to include understandings of new and underlying social constructs and motivations. Banksy maintains that outside is where street-art should be. It is here where identities can be forged. He makes urban art where gallery owners never go. When it appears, the people come. Like Geertz; it is the charisma of the king.

²⁴ To illustrate the sensory impact to which I've referred, the BBC news reported that *The Jungle*, Banksy's mural in the Calais refugee camp - had drawn numbers of people to it to bear witness - and touch the wall.

²⁵ A few years ago, Thompson, unemployed at the time, actually physically scraped a Banksy from a railway bridge in White Chapel. After more than five years and investing a few thousand pounds, he along with two other investors managed to sell it to a New Yorker for \$25,000 U.S. - or so it is said. Pest Control, Banksy's authentication body, would not visit it or sign it.

²⁶ Keszler Gallery in the Hamptons in New York City and Bank Robber, a micro-space viewing-room gallery in Notting Hill are familiar with at least part of the story of Banksy's *Wet Dog* and *Stop and Search* being carved out of the wall in Bethlehem where it originally appeared.

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