

## Chapter 5

# Considerations on the Art and Aesthetics of Rock Art

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The term 'rock art' is often used to refer to painting and engraving on rock. Many researchers qualify the term, while others refuse to associate the word 'art' with such painting and engraving. In the anthropological discourse of rock art there is a noticeable reluctance to associate prehistoric visual expression with art. The bases for this reluctance vary from researcher to researcher, but published comments revolve around a few general conceptions about art and aesthetics. These conceptions are grounded in the beliefs that art is a modern construct of Western civilization and that aesthetic sensibility played an insignificant role in the production and reception of prehistoric painting and engraving on rock. These beliefs, however, are based on uninformed ideas about art and aesthetics. The term 'rock art' is not only useful, it is appropriate.

This essay reviews the discontent with the word 'art' in discussions of prehistoric paintings and engravings on rock. The theoretical and institutional foundations of this discontent are outlined, with specific emphasis on the perceived inconsistencies between Western and non-Western attitudes to art and aesthetics. The absence or presence of the word 'art' in other languages is addressed and, more to the point, questioned as to its relevance to the actual absence or presence of art. The discontent with the term 'rock art' will be shown to have less to do with any specific quality of prehistoric painting or engraving on rock and more to do with a limited understanding of art in general. A properly informed understanding of art, one which includes prehistoric painting and engraving on rock as art – *rock art* – can be, in fact, productive and rewarding.

### **The Discontent**

The term 'rock art' entered the English language in 1959 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition, s.v., 'rock'), in J. Desmond Clark's, *The Prehistory Of Southern Africa* (1959). Within a decade, objections were raised to the 'art' in 'rock art', such as Campbell Grant's objection to the idea that American Indian rock art could be 'art for art's sake' (Grant, 1967). Polly Schaafsma used the term, but cautioned against imposing illegitimate limitations, noting that, 'the art of preliterate peoples, including rock art, is rarely *l'art pour l'art*... it was

created for various purposes' (1985, p. 259). She was not so much objecting to the term as acknowledging that such a limited definition (merely *l'art pour l'art*) is indeed too restrictive to allow for the inclusion of most (if not all) American Indian painting and engraving on rock.

After less than three decades of 'rock art', Paul Bahn and Jean Vertut noticed that the 'art' part was 'rapidly losing favour... since it presupposes an aesthetic function and lumps together a wide range of objects and types of image-making spanning 25 millennia'; they then proceeded to list a few of the proposed alternatives ("pictures", "iconography", "images", "pictograms/ideograms", "symbolic graphisms", "decorations") (Bahn and Vertut, 1988, p. 10). J. David Lewis-Williams considered that San rock art consisted of 'complex metaphors, not just aesthetically pleasing depictions', and that the makers were 'participating in a continuing tradition rather than creating individual *objets d'art*' (1983, p. 54). Carol Díaz-Granados, who summarized these objections, prefers 'rock graphics', since 'we cannot be certain that petroglyphs and pictographs were created as "art", that is, primarily for aesthetic purposes. It is possible that some were, but to call all rock graphics "art" does a disservice to both the topic and the people who created it' (Díaz-Granados, 1993, p. 10).

These alternatives were attempts to free rock art from the assumed confines of 'art' as it was defined in contemporary discourse – at least as far as that discourse was understood by these authors. 'Art' was characterized simply as '*l'art pour l'art*', as merely 'aesthetically pleasing depictions', as something that was *not* 'created for various purposes'. This characterization does not account for a lot of accepted art, such as Egyptian faïence, Minoan murals, Greek sculpture, Early Christian and Jewish wall painting, medieval stained glass, Renaissance portraiture or Gothic architecture, for example, which certainly serve(d) a purpose. The 'disservice' here is not in calling rock art 'art', but in confining 'art' to the definitions used by these authors. Whilst these objections were offered with little supporting discussion of art or aesthetics (Western or non-Western, historic or pre-historic), similar arguments have been offered that appear to be supported by a more substantial theoretical framework.

With the introduction of structuralism into the field of prehistoric art theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s this relatively complacent field of study began to receive substantial and detailed criticism. Regardless of how ultimately useful they may have been, the structuralist theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, C.S. Pierce, Claude Lévi-Strauss, André Leroi-Gourhan and Annette Laming-Empeire certainly shaped a generation of rock art research and have informed many of the contemporary criticisms of rock art as 'art'. This meta-explanatory approach to art, which elevated language 'to the level of a universal ordering or structuring principle that patterned all thought and action' (Risatti, 1990, p. 120), marked 'the "new" perception', as Terence Hawkes (1977, p. 17) characterized it.<sup>1</sup>

Following the ethnographic research of Lévi-Strauss and the rock art research under the direction of Laming-Empeire, both in Brazil, the discontents of 'art' in Brazilian rock art research began to appear in the related literature. Anne-Marie Pessis originally used the term 'rock art' (*art rupestre*) as well as the term 'graphic

registers' (*registres graphiques*) in her 1987 doctoral thesis on the rock art of Piauí, but abandoned the association with 'art' in subsequent publications. As she explained it, 'taken as artistic manifestations, only the formal and aesthetic characteristics were favored, which are of little use for archaeological research' (Pessis, 1992, p. 41). Of note is Pessis's adoption of Leroi-Gourhan's term *graphisme* to refer to a painted motif or figure, framing the prehistoric pictures as symbols to be *read* – a 'figurative language', as Leroi-Gourhan put it, 'the support medium of an irrevocably lost oral context' (1988, pp. 188, 190). By using *graphisme* (manner of writing or tracing) and 'register' (record, ledger, or catalogue), Pessis's analysis of pictures was freed from what she saw as the 'formal and aesthetic' confines of art, and could continue in the language of a text analysis.

An articulate critique of this perceived aesthetic miscontextualization of 'prehistoric representation' was provided by Silvia Tomášková, reflecting many of the same discontents as Pessis:

The historical shallowness of 'art' as a uniquely aesthetic marker is not difficult to demonstrate.... The historical track of the term 'art' over the past three centuries suggests that it comes hedged with preconceptions, leaving only a narrow corridor of possible interpretation.... The art object provides the means for an exploration of transcendental aesthetic quality, the attribute that must infuse any such piece to provide it with meaning, and resonates with the sensibilities of the audience. This connection is seen as an emotional response, outside the rational reasoning of everyday activities. The focus is not on the contextual role of the object, since the basic aesthetic function of the piece is not in doubt. (Tomášková, 1997, pp. 268–69)

Although she acknowledged that the discipline of art history 'uses some conceptual tools and theoretical approaches that are applicable to prehistoric materials' (1997, p. 266), it was in the 'narrow corridor' of the purely aesthetic realm where 'art' belonged, and prehistoric 'representation' did not.

Like Tomášková, Randall White preferred the term 'representation' because it has 'a wide and theoretically complex usage in anthropology', and presumedly unlike 'art', 'representations can take many forms, can have widely differing underlying logics, can be diversely motivated; and, importantly, many representational media do not even operate in the visual/formal channel' (White, 1997, p. 93). This was not only a reaction to art's 'status as an historical artifact of the later stages of the so-called Western tradition' (1997, p. 93), as he saw it, but reflected the view that art was limited to Tomášková's 'narrow corridor' of the purely aesthetic. By 'conceiving Upper Paleolithic representations as "art" in our sense', White wrote, 'we have prevented a serious treatment of meaning(s)' (1997, p. 94). White apparently overlooked the fact that a great deal of 'Western' art takes many forms, does indeed have both 'widely differing underlying logics' and 'diverse motivations' and is by no means restricted to the 'visual/formal channel'. He was also apparently unaware of the 'serious treatment of meaning(s)' readily available through even a cursory review of the art historical literature.

In their contribution to *Beyond Art: Pleistocene Image and Symbol*, Olga Soffer and Margaret Conkey summarized these discontents and included a reference to the lack of the word 'art' in some languages:

As defined in the past century, art is a cultural phenomenon that is assumed to function in what we recognize and even carve off separately as the aesthetic sphere ... . This aesthetic function is something that we cannot assume to have been the case in prehistory. In fact, ethnographic data from nonwestern cultures clearly show us otherwise; most such cultures do not make the kinds of distinctions that we do, they do not have an equivalent term for 'art' nor do they often differentiate the aesthetic from the symbolic from the sacred from the utilitarian, and so on.... Thus, as Tomášková suggests, many of the traditional approaches of art history are not appropriate to the interpretation of prehistoric remains because we cannot assume that their primary function was aesthetic. (Soffer and Conkey, 1997, p. 2)

This argument, that rock art research must proceed *beyond art*, reflects one of the new perspectives that has been brought to bear on the discipline. 'Today, we have refocused our attentions to include other locales, other contexts, other situations and, most importantly, withdrawn from seeing this body of data as representing "art". In doing so we argue that such a catholic view is absolutely crucial in reorienting the entire field of inquiry and interpretation' (Soffer and Conkey, 1997, p. 3). Curiously, this 'catholic view' (universal and all-embracing, if the dictionary is correct) does not embrace the idea of *art*.<sup>2</sup>

### The Non-Western Voice

When living voices are available to the rock art researcher they should be taken into account. Occasionally, they are difficult to ignore, such as David Mowaljarlai's emphatic declaration:

Someone told me just recently that 'rock art is dead'. If 'Art' was dead, that would not matter to we Aborigines. We have never thought of our rock paintings as 'Art'. To us they are IMAGES. IMAGES with ENERGIES that keep us ALIVE – EVERY PERSON, EVERYTHING WE STAND ON, ARE MADE FROM, EAT AND LIVE ON. (Mowaljarlai, 1992, p. 8)

Mowaljarlai used the English word 'art' and, quite assuredly, declared that it was not appropriate in the context of Ngarinyin rock painting. One of the most conscientious examples of incorporating (not just referencing) American Indian concerns about rock 'art' was a paragraph included in *La Pintura* with the 2001 Conference Program for the American Rock Art Research Association (ARARA) meeting in Pendleton, Oregon. The text was prepared by J. Claire Dean with representatives of the Nez Perce, Warm Springs, Umatilla, and Yakama tribes.<sup>3</sup> Elders of the Umatilla Language Committee made it clear that 'rock art' was a misnomer, as it was meaningless to them in the context of the images. The following is an excerpt of that paragraph:

Native American elders in the area have voiced discomfort at the use of the word 'art', as used in the term 'rock art'. They feel that its use is both inappropriate and inaccurate when describing pictograph and petroglyph images. While ARARA recognizes and respects their concerns and admits that a label such as 'rock images' might be more exact, we also acknowledge that the term 'rock art' is generally used, understood, and accepted as the common expression to collectively describe these images. (Dean, 2001, p. 2)

Even the conference logo was an invented design, not an appropriated (*stolen?*) American Indian motif. The development of the logo was in itself another involved process of cooperation between ARARA (Dean), Jeff Van Pelt (cultural resource protection manager for the Umatilla) and the local tribes.

The artist Frank LaPena (Wintu Nation), on the other hand, expressed a decidedly different attitude about the 'art' of rock art:

As an art form, rock art is aesthetically some of the finest work ever done. It continues to fascinate and relate to contemporary times because philosophically it gives us a vision of a living earth balanced with both the spiritual and physical in harmony. (LaPena, 1983, p. 27)

It is clear that there is no monolithic attitude towards rock art *as art* among American Indians. To the nations consulted for the ARARA paragraph, 'art' was an inadequate, perhaps insulting, term when applied to the prehistoric 'rock images' on their land. For LaPena, rock art is not only art, but some of it is great art. The difference here is most likely in the understanding that they have of 'art' and how they apply that definition to their cultural legacy.<sup>4</sup>

According to the discontents summarized here, prehistoric rock paintings and engravings should not be considered art, and are thus ill-served by an art-historical approach (which has been assumed to address works of art 'through the lens of aesthetics' [Tomášková, 1997, p. 259]).<sup>5</sup> Two basic discontents have been repeatedly expressed, each with overlapping implications: (a) art is a non-utilitarian, purely aesthetic pursuit, whereas, prehistoric visual expression served an important utilitarian function – it is a socially vital *text* of sorts; and, (b) Western theories of art and aesthetics approach prehistoric art from the same conceptual framework as do the modern Fine Arts of the galleries, salons, museums, and marketplace – an approach incapable of addressing the visual expressions of non-Western cultures who have no such conceptual framework. The following section of this essay will address the presence or absence of an equivalent term for 'art' in non-Western societies, and the relevance of this presence or absence in the context of non-Western *art*. A discussion of the validity of the art historical approach follows.

### Art, and the Word 'Art'

Soffer and Conkey stated that most non-Western cultures 'do not have an equivalent term for "art" nor do they often differentiate the aesthetic from the symbolic from the sacred from the utilitarian, and so on' (1997, p. 2). This implies that the lack of the word 'art' in the language of a particular culture equates to the lack of *art* in that culture. The published exchange between Richard L. Anderson and two reviewers of his 1990 book, *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art*, addressed this apparent lack of art in non-Western visual expression.

In *Calliope's Sisters*, Anderson sought to examine 'the core of art itself' in nine non-Western societies (Anderson, 1990, p. xii). Jacques Maquet voiced concern over the lack of 'precise indicators' in Anderson's analyses which he considered 'vague' and in need of 'some criteria to delimit the focal phenomenon of [Anderson's] study: art'. Maquet's criticism was specifically aimed at Anderson's 'lack of analytical rigor [which] perpetuates the widespread opinion that [almost] anything more or less related to art can be included in an art theory' (Maquet, 1991, pp. 967–68). In Kris L. Hardin's review of *Calliope's Sisters* she noted a reliance upon imposing 'Euro-American categories of experience, form, behavior, and, finally, art' (Hardin, 1991, p. 119). Like Maquet, Hardin also wanted a more precise *inventory* of the characteristics used to identify the presence of art in various aspects of non-Western material culture.<sup>6</sup>

Maquet and Hardin questioned whether the *art* that Anderson studied was actually *art*. They claimed, as Soffer and Conkey did, that 'some – perhaps most – languages lack words that translate even approximately as *art*' (Anderson, 1992, p. 927). In his defence, Anderson noted that he adopted 'an effectively inductive approach' (1992, p. 928). In *Calliope's Sisters* he reduced the definition of art to the traits he considered 'most commonly associated in the Western mind with art: ... its being beautiful, skillfully made, and non-utilitarian', among others (1990, p. 22).<sup>7</sup>

If indeed 'art' can be neatly defined in a few words, then that definition must account for the true diversity of art (from a sculpture by Myron to one by Mendieta, from a Roman mosaic to a Rauschenberg combine, from a Gainsborough to a Guston and so on). The traits mentioned above and in the previous review do not account for the true diversity of art, Western or not. Nonetheless, these qualities have been used to segregate the art of the West, from the creative products (*non-art*?) of other cultures. This segregation has been justified at times by the inability of the researcher to find a word for 'art' in the *Other's* language.

For example, Hardin's insistence that 'Euro-American categories of ... art' should be avoided in analyses of non-Western cultures is reflected in her discussion of the dance 'occasions' of the Kono of Sierra Leone. Her study focused on the 'connections between aesthetic response and "non-art" experience' (Hardin, 1988, p. 35). She considered 'art' inappropriate in this context. Babatunde Lawal's 1996 study of the Yoruba (south-west Nigeria and the Republic of Benin)

*Gèlèdè* spectacle likewise addressed the aesthetics of a West African dance cycle. Unlike Hardin, however, Lawal not only provided an indigenous word for 'art' (*onà*, in Yoruba), but also explained in detail the diverse ways in which art and aesthetic sensibility function in Yoruba culture. Perhaps the Kono had no synonym for the Yoruba word *onà* (that is, no word for 'art'), or perhaps Hardin could simply find no term that conformed to *her* definition of art (hence, *no art?*). Perhaps it was just Lawal's personal knowledge of Yoruba language and culture that allowed him to find a suitable synonym for 'art' (see especially Lawal, 2001).<sup>8</sup>

The difference between the 'non-art' of the Kono and the art (*onà*) of the Yoruba is in all likelihood not something *measurable* (quantitatively identifiable in the object or activity in which it is expressed or embodied). The difference is more likely to be found in Hardin's and Lawal's approach to West African culture – in their ideas of art, reinforced by their respective disciplines (cultural anthropology and art history). That 'art' was deemed appropriate by an art historian is no surprise. But it is significant to note that Lawal did not limit the Yoruba idea of art to something non-utilitarian, or to something that exists in the narrow corridor of the purely aesthetic realm. This calls into question not only the investigator's definition of 'art', but the effectiveness of investigating a word as a substitute for investigating a concept.<sup>9</sup>

While some researchers have gone to great lengths to avoid the word 'art' and art-related terminology when discussing non-Western cultures, others (even anthropologists) have proceeded with detailed and informed analyses of non-Western cultures, including their *art*.<sup>10</sup> These studies have not only added to the understanding of these cultures, but have also provided valuable insights into the many ways in which art and aesthetics function in society (Western or Other-wise). Anecdotal claims that 'some – perhaps most – languages lack words that translate even approximately as *art*' (Anderson, 1992, p. 927) or that 'ethnographic data from nonwestern cultures clearly show us... [that] most such cultures... do not have an equivalent term for "art"' (Soffer and Conkey, 1997, p. 2),<sup>11</sup> seem to reflect a problem with linguistics – a hindrance to compiling a glossary – rather than evidence that these cultures have no art.

This is easy to understand in the context of the attitudes and definitions of 'art' reviewed in the introduction of this essay. If, for example, an anthropologist questioned an indigenous consultant about the word she or he uses for 'art', but defined it as something 'created primarily for aesthetic purposes', something 'differentiated from the symbolic, the sacred, or the utilitarian', or something 'being beautiful, skillfully made, and non-utilitarian', then it would not be surprising if the consultant could offer no word for the anthropologist's 'art'. In fact, if these same questions were asked of many Western artists (for example, those responsible for medieval manuscripts, Baroque architectural sculpture, neoclassical painting, De Stijl painting and architecture, Abstract Expressionist paintings, postmodern works and so on), the outcome would likely be the same. The reason why some cultures have art and others supposedly don't is probably less a reflection of any concept of art on the part of the Other and more likely a reflection of the definition of 'art' used by the investigator or understood by the indigenous consultant.



The question of what art *is* is by no means limited to discussions of West versus non-West, or historic versus prehistoric. When, in the late nineteenth century, artists began to challenge Renaissance ideals of representational illusionism, when they began to emphasize colour over drawing, when they began to stress content over subject-matter, the conservative institutions of the European art world were not ready to consider this new art *as art*. Contemporary experimental art continues to challenge conservative and oversimplified definitions of ‘art’. The following discussion addresses the need to understand art (not just rock art) *in context* – beyond the limited definitions promoted by conservative nineteenth-century academic principles of taste and judgement.

### Early Art and Recent Institutions

The claims that rock art researchers need to ‘withdraw’ from seeing prehistoric art as art and that rock art research needs to be ‘reoriented’ to avoid some assumed inappropriate art historical approach (Soffer and Conkey, 1997, p. 3), do not account for the fact that, as early as the 1950s, students of art history were already being cautioned against an improper contextualization of art. As E.H. Gombrich wrote:

There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today they buy their paints, and design posters for the Underground; they did many things in between. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish. (Gombrich, 1962, p. 5)

So the ‘crucial’ need to understand prehistoric art in its proper context is something that students of art history have been made aware a half-century or so earlier. Again, Gombrich writes:

If... we mean by art some kind of luxury, something to enjoy in museums and exhibitions or something special to use as a precious decoration in the best parlour, we must realize that this use of the word is a very recent development and that many of the greatest builders, painters or sculptors of the past never dreamed of it... [We] are not likely to understand the art of the past if we are quite ignorant of the aims it had to serve... not as something nice to look at, but as something powerful to *use*. (Gombrich, 1962, pp. 19–20)

Gombrich’s approach to art was based on the understanding that art has been, and continues to be, an important and diverse activity,<sup>12</sup> meaning different things to different people at different times. This is quite different from the assumed limitations of art and art history that the critics of rock ‘art’ claimed as the basis for their discontent.



Gombrich made clear that the museums and galleries of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century art world – the modern institutions of art – provide only limited examples of what art is (and was). In fact, salient arguments have been made that these institutions have occasionally led to a misleading idea of art. Donald Brook sees the ‘fatal weakness of the art institution... as the defining authority for art’, in its ‘essential conservatism’ (1992, p. 34).<sup>13</sup> His criticism of the institutions of the modern art world was primarily aimed at justifying the inclusion of contemporary experimental art *as art*. But he also detailed the way in which, in his opinion, some historians and curators have propped up a canon of ‘great’ works, those which stand as *undeniable epitomes* of Western art, in the course of creating a History of Art (recall Gombrich, ‘Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish’).

In an effort to ‘affect the range of objects taken to be the paradigms of art’ (Brook, 1992, p. 24), Brook proposed his Transinstitutional Theory of Art:

If art is conceived... as *transinstitutional*, then its prospect of viability is much improved. Art objects are things given a role that is not the role of dedication to *any particular institution*, but on the contrary to any and all institutions.... There are, for art, *no* rules of relevance. It is not irrelevant to say of a work of art, *as such*, that it is arguably immoral or that it serves the interest of the ruling class, or that it is beautiful, or that it was greatly admired by G.F. Hegel on a visit to Vienna in 1824. (Brook, 1992, p. 19)

With regard to prehistoric art, as Gombrich and Tomášková quite accurately observed, *context* is of primary importance in understanding its role in the long history of human expression. This is, of course, an important consideration in understanding *any* art or artist (Michaelangelo, Mapplethorpe, Onesimos, Ofili, O’Sullivan or Serrano, for example). But where Tomášková and others called for an abandonment of ‘art’ (in ‘rock art’ specifically), Brook argued for a much more inclusive definition of the word – one which more accurately reflects the works that have been eschewed by some authors (closer to what ‘used to be the role of the definition of art’ [Brook, 1992, p. 33]).<sup>14</sup> This more inclusive ‘art’ allows for works from outside the conservative institutional canon – those of the disenfranchised Others (works, for example, which some anthropologists have preferred to classify as *non-art*, or *beyond art*).

## Rock Art

What about prehistoric rock art? In the absence of a reasonable argument that art is a recent manifestation of culture (Western or non-Western), the likelihood remains that the production, reception and criticism of art existed in prehistory. The formal evidence is clear: the materials, techniques, and diversity of rock art attest to traditions that were just as sophisticated and diverse as much historic art. Cognitively, the question of whether or not the peoples responsible for rock art

were engaging in the sort of aesthetic considerations that living cultures engage in remains unanswerable. But, rather than fleeing from the word 'art', perhaps in an effort to justify a methodology with a different (art-free) vocabulary, researchers who must deal with prehistoric paintings and engravings would benefit from considering the concept of art and the many ways in which art has functioned throughout human history. In short, there is little reason to assume that simply *being prehistoric* somehow means *being pre-art*.

Several important distinctions, for better or for worse, have been drawn in this discussion of art, aesthetics and rock art. Perhaps the most insidious distinction is the segregation of 'Western' from 'non-Western'. In common parlance these terms have a wide and accepted use, referring to traditions that arose either inside or near Europe versus those that arose in other parts of the world. However, 'European culture' did not develop in a vacuum, free from outside influences. There are even noticeable differences between northern and southern, and eastern and western European cultures. Traditions from Africa, the Near East, and the Far East have influenced European art and culture, perhaps as significantly as many indigenous European traditions (note how the term 'indigenous European' is rarely, if ever, used).

This segregation is insidious in that it frequently includes implicit references to colonialism and imperialist transgressions upon non-Europeans. In this regard, the use of the term 'art' itself might be seen by some as simply another example of cultural appropriation (terminological imperialism?). This is understandable given the early practice of collecting non-European 'artifacts' and transporting them to European 'ethnographic museums' where they were displayed, arguably, as trophies. Many of these 'artifacts' were in turn moved into what are now called Museums of *Art*, or even Museums of *Fine Art*. At issue here is not the *art-ness* of the objects, but the context of their acquisition and display. With regard to rock art, there is nothing innately insidious about calling it *art*, as long as it is considered in its proper context (again, Gombrich, 1962, pp. 19–20; see also Brody, 1991, pp. 9–17). Just as contemporary museums must educate the viewing public about the proper context of their collections, rock art researchers must educate their colleagues and consultants about the proper context and scope of *art*. Perhaps if David Mowaljarlai and the American Indian nations consulted for the ARARA paragraph understood the many diverse and important ways art *actually* functions and carries significance in 'The West', they would not have reacted with such objection to the term 'rock art'. *Perhaps*.

### All Things Considered

Assumptions that all art production and reception must be limited to some disinterested, aesthetic realm do not stand up to even the most rudimentary critical analyses. Modern anthropologists and art historians have made commendable progress in moving beyond the nineteenth-century theoretical foundations of their disciplines. Some outdated and limited concepts of art and aesthetics,

unfortunately, seem to be surviving remnants of this disciplinary baggage. This is most apparent in the discourse of rock art. The imaginary segregation of aesthetic sensibility from the practical aspects of living not only ignores that fact that there is much art with practical uses in *every* culture, but also serves to impose an illegitimate dialectic upon the aesthetic sensibilities of non-Western cultures. To acknowledge the aesthetic considerations manifested in, for example, American Indian art is not to deny the art's communicative, functional or spiritual significance. In fact, it serves to place it alongside the most meaningful expressions of Western cultures. Coming to terms with the *art*-ness of rock art complements the understanding of prehistoric and non-Western visual expression and enlightens the overall conception of art as a pan-cultural human phenomenon.

## Notes

- 1 'Structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss argue that "language" designates the complex structure of symbols, codes and conventions that, existing prior to and independent of any particular subject, guides all thought and action. Language functions like a template that patterns human behavior. The self-conscious subject does not deliberately create or intentionally construct the linguistic structures that direct his life. To the contrary, language, the intricate symbolic order, constitutes every subject' (Taylor, 1987, p. 34).
- 2 It is not clear whose definitions of art 'in the past century' Soffer and Conkey used to support these assumptions. Helen Gardner (1926), Erwin Panofsky (1939, 1955), E.H. Gombrich (1950, 1960), Michael Baxandall (1972) and Marilyn Stokstad (1995) certainly did not consider the function of art to be restricted to the 'aesthetic sphere'. On the contrary, in addition to the aesthetic aspects of art, each of these authors (whose texts are among the standard introductory readings in art history) also made clear the various ways in which art functions (or has functioned) in society. The 'catholic view' of rock art that Soffer and Conkey considered 'crucial' was a reaction to a rather limited characterization of art and the discourse of art history.
- 3 The official titles of the tribes whose representatives reviewed the paragraph are: the Nez Perce tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. The information provided here is from a personal communication from J. Claire Dean (2001) explaining the motivations and process of involving local nations in the preparation of the conference.
- 4 It should be noted that some objections to the term 'art' are not limited to theoretical disagreements about art and aesthetics, but reflect basic concerns about ownership, appropriation and the labelling of indigenous or traditional non-Western knowledge (by a patronizing or formerly-patronizing society). John Clegg wisely pointed this out when reviewing this manuscript and, although it cannot be explored further here, it is nonetheless an extremely important consideration. Thomas Heyd also addressed this issue in a paper delivered at the International Rock Art Congress in Alice Springs, Australia (2000), published as Heyd (2003).
- 5 Tomášková (1997, p. 259) did admit that art history in the last half of the twentieth century has been characterized by a plurality of approaches. See, for example, Howard

Risatti's *Postmodern Perspectives* (1990) for a review of art criticism in the late twentieth century, including ideological criticism, cognitive and communicative theory, feminist criticism, and psychoanalytical criticism.

- 6 This approach reflects a need to define art as a *measurable thing*, quantitatively identifiable in the object or activity in which it is expressed or embodied. A salient observation was made by John Clegg, regarding the attempt to quantify the elements of something as nebulous as art:

Mathesis is a perfectly good English word which means the counting or measuring of things which are not normally counted or measured.... In our time the frontiers of measurement are at Style, and Art. An archaeological generation ago, it was fashionable to do QUANTIFICATION, and equally fashionable to sneer at the practise, on the grounds that it constitutes unnecessarily abstruse mathematics for its own sake. If you can't shoot it, or cut it down, then count it and perform a test of significance, which will save you from needing to understand what you are trying to do. (Clegg, 1995, p. 3)

Noël Carroll addresses this quite eloquently in his introduction to *Theories of Art Today*, where he writes 'interest in the question "What is art?" has slackened somewhat.... But even if the question of the definition of art is no longer the biggest game in town, it is still a very lively one.... Though no view commands the field at present, progress on the problem is being made' (Carroll, 2000, p. 4). In the same volume, Denis Dutton ('But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art') refines Anderson's inventory of characteristics required for 'art' and discusses the difficulties of doing so. Stephen Davies' contribution to *Theories of Art Today*, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', addresses in detail many of the same points put forth in here, but without reference to rock art. Carroll's edited volume is strongly recommended for further exploration of the issues discussed in this essay. Also see Steven Leuthold's chapter 'Is there "Art" in Indigenous Aesthetics?' in Leuthold (1998) for another detailed discussion of attempts to define art in American Indian and other non-Western cultures.

- 7 The opposition of intentional beauty and intentional utility is reminiscent of the ongoing debate over the separation of Crafts and Fine Art. See, for example, Risatti, 'Crafts and Fine Art: An Argument in Favor of Boundaries' (2001).
- 8 It is important to note one of the observations Anderson made in defence of his work, specifically regarding the insistence that the lack of a word equates to the lack of a corresponding concept ('art' and art, for example). The following is from Anderson's response to Maquet and Hardin:

The situation parallels that found in other areas of anthropology. For example, consider a non-Western society that has no single word that translates directly into English as *kinship* and that, similarly, lacks a coherent articulated theory of kinship. A fieldworker who encounters such a group is likely to possess an abstract concept of kinship, with constituent notions of consanguinity, marriage, lineality, and so on, all based on the way *kinship* has been used in the West generally, and especially among people, such as anthropologists, who talk a lot about kinship. The absence in a particular non-Western society of a native kinship system, explicitly and consciously verbalized by members of the culture, would not lead most researchers to conclude that the people have no kinship system or that there is nothing to be said

regarding kinship in the society, especially if many of the concomitants of kinship, such as clans and lineages, rules of descent, and so on, are in evidence.... Eugene Ogan (personal communication, 1992) has pointed out that Schneider's critique (1984) of anthropologists' usual method of studying kinship parallels Hardin's criticism of my way of looking at non-Western philosophies of art. Nevertheless, most anthropological writing, past and present, is based on the premise that both kinship and art are found in all cultures (cf. Brown, 1991, p. 140). (Anderson, 1992, pp. 928–29)

- 9 See Davies' 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition' for an excellent discussion of this:

The crux concerns the *concepts* possessed within non-Western cultures, not the *vocabularies* of their languages. It may be that a culture employs a complex phrase instead of a single word. That we use 'second cousin once removed', not a solitary term, does not mean that we have no concept of that familial relationship ... . And the French 'conscience' corresponds to both 'conscience' and 'consciousness', but this does not entail that the French do not discriminate between morality and mentation. (Davies, 2000, p. 202)

- 10 Detailed analyses of Brazilian Indian art and aesthetics, for example, include Barcelos Neto (1999); Basso (1985); Costa (1987, 1988); Fernandes-Dias (2001); and Müller (1990).
- 11 It is unclear what these authors mean by 'most non-Western cultures' (they do not identify how many or which cultures do not have a word for art). This certainly does not include the cultures of India, China, and Japan, who have long-standing traditions of art and aesthetic discourse.
- 12 The idea that 'the arts' include a diversity of activities is not limited to mid-century art history. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* still includes in its frontispiece the following statement:

'The arts' are understood broadly to include not only traditional forms such as music, literature, theater, painting, architecture, sculpture, and dance, but also more recent additions such as film, photography, earthworks, and performance art, as well as the crafts, decorative arts, and various aspects of popular culture.

- 13 George Dickie's (1974) institutional theory of art, as Brook sees it, 'identifies something (that we might as well call "institutional art"), but real art evades its grasp' (Brook, 1992, p. 16). This is reminiscent of Alfred Gell's remarks (1998, p. 1), paraphrased here by Fernandes-Dias (2001, p. 59):

... what has characterized an anthropology of art? Is it not a particular, arbitrary and restricted field of study—the arts of the colonial and post-colonial periphery, of pockets of ethnic groups within national states, with their diverse minorities (female, sexual, popular, immigrational), alongside 'primitive art' kept in museums – rather than a valid anthropological theory applicable to artistic manifestations in any cultural context? Is it not more the study of an 'anthropological art', rather than an anthropological study of art?

- 14 Brook's definition of art as 'unique examples of transinstitutionally recognised

unintentional modelling' (1992, p. 24), requires a lengthy discussion that is beyond the scope of this essay. He provides a detailed explanation of 'transinstitutional', 'unintentional', and 'modelling' in his 'What, even *Mona Lisa*?' (1992, pp. 15–25).