

Conceptions and Approaches

‘Sociology and art make an odd couple,’ writes Pierre Bourdieu (1980: 207). Art tends to rebel against scientific images of the world, while sociology tends to thrive on demystifying the enchanting in social life. Art tends to revolt against materialistic explanations of life, while sociology tends to exult in exposing the singular and unique as socially constructed and socially reproduced.

We begin our exploration of this ‘odd couple’ here by first briefly reviewing some of the most long-standing conceptions of art in western thought which precede the emergence of self-consciously sociological and sociohistorical conceptions of art in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will describe these long-standing conceptions of art in the most general terms as ‘metaphysical conceptions’. We will define metaphysical conceptions of art as conceptions that think of art in terms of certain timeless norms of communication valid for all history and all societies. We begin by discussing three such types of conception here: conceptions that think of art in terms of an essence of ‘beauty’; conceptions that think of art in terms of an essence of naturalistic representation, founded on ‘imitation of nature’; and conceptions that think of art in terms of an essence of ‘aesthetic experience’. Then we turn to the variety of ways in which sociological thinking challenges these conceptions.

Metaphysical conceptions of art

Beauty

Metaphysical conceptions of beauty in western thought about art can be traced to the legacy of the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher

Plato. In *The Republic* (written in c.360 BC), Plato held that if art was to contribute to the goodness of the commonwealth, it was essential that art elevated the minds of the people to the eternal beauty of the cosmos, alongside the eternal truth sought by philosophers, and the eternal justice sought by statesmen and lawgivers. Plato wrote in a context in which the word for 'art' in ancient Greek essentially meant 'craft' or 'skill' (*technē*). It did not possess the additional connotation of creative expression 'for its own sake' carried by the word today. Painters and sculptors in ancient Greece consequently carried low social status; they were viewed as craftsmen on the same level as carpenters or shoemakers. Plato thus held a low estimation of the role of artists in society. Plato viewed artists as dealing essentially in the mere appearances of things, not in the true nature of the world. Plato insisted that if artists and their works were to have a rightful place in society, they had to encourage people to transcend their finite earthly condition and aspire to knowledge of the unchanging order of the cosmos.

In the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Platonic ideas of beauty were associated with classical Greek principles of right measure, proportion and perspective in painting and sculpture. In the Baroque period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Greek principles of drawing and composition became institutionalized in the foundation of royal academies of art which taught a hierarchy of painterly forms. Historical, mythological and biblical scenes were regarded as the most noble of images, while portraiture and landscape occupied a lower place in the hierarchy, and 'realistic' scenes of ordinary people going about their daily life were viewed as beyond the pale of acceptable representation. The concept of beauty promulgated in the Renaissance and the Baroque academies thus remained highly idealized and prescriptive in character. It rested on a Platonic understanding of beauty as something eternal, absolute and transcendent, and as inhering in some basic cosmological content. This stands at odds with more modern understandings of beauty as being not absolute but *relative* to changing historical contexts of perception, and as existing only 'in the eye of the beholder' in some important general sense, not 'in itself'.

The imitation of nature

A second long-standing conception of art in western thought concerns ideas of the 'imitation of nature'. In both pagan and Christian cosmologies, art was thought to attain beauty by virtue of its

imitation of the original beauty of nature. Nature was held up as the image of perfection; and art was seen as having the goal of imitating this perfection. In Greek thought, this is known as the doctrine of mimesis. Aristotle, in his treatise on theatre, *The Poetics* (written in c.350 BC), taught that

Epic poetry and tragedy, also comedy . . . and most of the music performed on the flute and the lyre are all, in a collective sense, imitations (*mimesis*). . . . Just as certain persons, by rule of art or mere practice, make likenesses of various objects by imitating them in colours and forms, and others again imitate by means of the voice, so these arts . . . imitate by means of rhythm, language and melody. . . . [F]rom childhood it is instinctive in human beings to imitate, and man differs from the other animals as the most imitative of all and getting his first lessons by imitation, and by instinct also all human beings take pleasure in imitations. (Aristotle 1982: 45–7)

In the Renaissance, the most famous analogue of Aristotle's doctrine is Hamlet's speech in the play within a play that Hamlet stages in order to shame his uncle into confessing the murder of his father. Shakespeare's hero counsels his actors to be true to their parts, not to over-act, not to be false:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature. (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 18–23)

Ideas of mimesis in art are often closely linked to concepts of naturalistic 'verisimilitude' in painting, where pictures are seen as having the goal of producing *copies* of reality, or *likenesses* between images and the objects they are held to 'represent'. This doctrine exercised considerable influence in the Renaissance period. It rested on the prestige of a story in Plato's *Republic* about a Greek painter Zeuxis who once painted a picture of some grapes so life-like that birds flew down to peck at it. The story encapsulates the attractions of the so-called *trompe l'oeil* effect that 'fools the eye' into mistaking an image for the real thing. The effect is often to be found in Renaissance and Baroque frescos containing scenes that appear to continue the space of the viewer so that the viewer is invited to walk into the scene, and most graphically in seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings of opulent food on tables. In contemporary

art-historical terminology, this doctrine is often referred to as 'illusionism'.

It should be clear that illusionism in painting is impossible to fulfil if it is interpreted in any literal sense. No picture can ever be said to be an entirely neutral reproduction of its object. The eye of the artist does not behave like the shutter of a camera – where camera shutters are thought of as purely physical mechanisms, without emotions and preconceptions. In their very framing and selection of objects of representation, artists always produce an interpretation of reality, which reflects something of themselves and their world. In *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Gombrich (1960) shows how while many western artists since the Renaissance can be seen as perfecting a technique of naturalistic perspective, this development always took the form of a discontinuous sequence. Artists always worked within prior frameworks of style and never gradually advanced to some 'innocent eye', free of social conventions. Thus it is misleading to think of perspective and recessive shading in painting as being more 'faithful to nature' than more schematic and 'flatter' languages of representation, such as those characteristic of medieval art and some non-western art. As Nelson Goodman (1976) demonstrates, perspective is a more rationalized method of representation than symbolic figuration, but it is not 'truer to nature' in any absolute sense.

We may observe that Platonic ideas of beauty and Aristotelian ideas of mimesis are not generally self-reflective conceptions of art. Just as ideas of beauty change over time, so different cultures construct different ideas of nature that reflect changing frameworks of perception. Ideas of nature and of the world 'in itself' are themselves artifice, constructed in the image of artistic change through history.

In the eighteenth century, much of the metaphysical contents of these earlier doctrines began to recede in the face of growing historical awareness and a gradual shift of attention towards subjective 'sensibilities' for perceiving things as beautiful. It was this shift that led to the rise of the idea of a science of aesthetics in the European Enlightenment, to which we now turn.

Aesthetic experience

Deriving from the Greek word for 'perception' – *aisthesis* – aesthetics refers to the study of *pleasure in perception*. Although some of its meanings have changed since its first appearance in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, aesthetics remains the key term today for that branch of philosophical inquiry that is concerned

with the grounds for experiences of pleasure in sensory objects. In particular, aesthetics refers to the grounds for intersubjectively valid *judgements of taste* about sensory objects. Aesthetics is concerned in principle with judgements of taste about sensory objects of any kind, whether or not made by human hands. However, it is most often concerned with judgements of taste about those particular products of human agency known as ‘works of art’.

The first significant occurrence of the term ‘aesthetics’ is to be found in the title of a treatise published in 1750 by the Prussian rationalist philosopher Alexander Baumgarten. Baumgarten defined beauty as the sensation of pleasure accruing from arrangements of forms in consonance with reason and logic. A second landmark was an essay published in 1746 by the French writer Charles Batteux, titled *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*. Batteux argued that a common principle could be discerned among all the fine art forms of painting, sculpture, poetry, music and dance. Batteux’s text finally brought to an end the ancient association of artists with mostly practical skills and crafts. It inaugurated the idea of what Kristeller (1970) calls ‘the modern system of the arts’: the idea of a pantheon of art forms, all capable of realization and contemplation for their own sake, without regard to practical purpose or utility.

The idea that a work of art was to be savoured and contemplated was something new and specific to the secularizing spirit of Enlightenment Europe. The birth of aesthetics went together with a spirit of sceptical inquiry in relation to received understandings of the common good, as defined by the church and the Bible. In England and Scotland, this took the form of empirical psychological theories of morality, represented by a preoccupation with pity, sympathy and sensibility. In France it took the form of critical essays and pamphlets on progress, despotism, civilization and education, such as in the moral criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and in the writings of the many authors of the French *encyclopédie*. However, the most systematic expression of the standpoint of aesthetic analysis comes to us from the Prussian Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the last of his three philosophical treatises, *The Critique of Judgement*, published in 1790.

One of the striking facts about Kant’s text is that it makes relatively little mention of works of art as such. The first part of the text, titled ‘Analytic of Beauty’, is mostly concerned with the subjective act of perceiving something as beautiful, not with any particular sphere or substance in which beauty might be said to inhere. Kant made clear that in affirming a judgement of taste, the judging

person makes no strict claim to state *what* the object is, in the sense of a scientific statement about its properties or causes, nor to state how 'worthy' or how 'useful' the object is, in the sense of a judgement of its moral integrity or a judgement of its practical utility. The person simply makes a claim for the pleasure it evokes on 'disinterested contemplation'. In this sense Kant established that aesthetic judgements possess an *autonomous character*. In his previous treatise, *The Critique of Practical Reason* (of 1788), Kant had sought to propound a non-theological account of man's grounds for refraining from actions that harm the well-being of others. In his first treatise, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (of 1781), he had sought to propound a non-dogmatic account of man's grounds for knowledge of experience. Thus in his third and final treatise, Kant completed his secular redefinition of the traditional contents of western philosophy in terms of the three autonomous domains of science, morality and aesthetics.

In the nineteenth century, ideas of the autonomy of aesthetic judgements soon became linked to the idea of the autonomy of art itself. Art was seen as resting on a self-evident value of its own. Among the German idealist and early romantic thinkers, art was held up as communicating a special kind of understanding of the world, equal to that of religion and philosophy. G. W. F. Hegel placed art alongside religion and philosophy as three forms of access to ultimate truth that he termed 'absolute spirit'. Later in the nineteenth century, some writers saw art as constituting a last remaining source of spiritual salvation for a society corrupted by industry, materialism and scientific rationalism. Art was seen as holding out possibilities of transcendence and mythical self-understanding for a society that had lost faith in the traditional institutions of religion. This outlook is often known as 'art for art's sake', after the French nineteenth-century slogan, *l'art pour l'art*.

Ideas of 'art for art's sake' represent the high-water mark of metaphysical conceptions of art. They are increasingly disputed in the nineteenth century by different currents of thought that seek to place ordinary craft skills on an equal footing with the fine arts. Some nineteenth-century currents of thought seek to establish a firmer connection between art and morality and different national traditions of culture, and they seek to understand art in a more comparative historical light, based on scholarly study of different civilizations and peoples and their different worldviews. These currents of thought lay the foundations for a more sociohistorical way of thinking about art. As early as the eighteenth century, writers such as Montesquieu, Denis Diderot and Giambattista Vico wrote

of the influence of climate, milieu and social order on historical traditions of art. In the nineteenth century, the utopian socialist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote of artists such as Jacques-Louis David and Gustave Courbet as spokesmen of the 'spirit of the age'. Similarly, Madame de Stäel and the positivist historian Hyppolite Taine both wrote at length of geography, climate and 'race' as cardinal influences on historical schools and styles of art (Rifkin 1992). The nineteenth century also saw an increasing pre-occupation with artistic activities in 'primitive' societies. These had been brought to attention by a steady influx of exotic artefacts in western museums of archaeology and anthropology, plundered and trafficked across the seas by colonial travellers and merchants.

We may say that all these developments and currents of thought inaugurate a recognizably new way of thinking about art based on dissatisfaction with metaphysical conceptions of art. Late nineteenth-century historical consciousness ushers in a distinctively modern way of thinking about art that avoids attempting to define art in terms of norms and essences of beauty valid for all time and all societies. It is to this distinctively modern, sociological way of thinking about art that we now turn.

Sociological conceptions of art

Although it is possible to discern a few disparate strands of a sociological and sociohistorical way of thinking about art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is only from the early twentieth century that we can speak of an institutionalized body of sociological studies of art. We will introduce six principal schools of approach here: first, humanistic historicist approaches in early twentieth-century art history; second, Marxist social history of art; third, cultural studies, cultural materialism and postmodernism; fourth, institutional theories of art in analytical philosophy; fifth, anthropological studies of art in indigenous societies; and sixth, empirical studies of contemporary arts institutions.

Humanistic art history

Humanistic historicist approaches to art history refer primarily to a succession of influential German scholars active in the early decades of the twentieth century. These scholars are today seen as founding

figures in the discipline of art history. They include the names of Aby Warburg, Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, Karl Schnaase, Adolf von Hildebrandt, Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Cassirer and Edgar Wind. The German art scholars developed methods of pictorial analysis oriented to evaluating formal compositional structures in works of art. They saw impartial historical understanding as contributing to the enrichment of the human personality. They saw art as occupying a central place in the 'human studies', then known in German as the *Geisteswissenschaften* or 'sciences of spirit', after the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. They set about demonstrating the methodological integrity of art history in relation to established disciplines such as philology, archaeology, economy and the natural sciences. Wölfflin (1950) held that paintings could be studied in terms of definite types of form and style. He proposed that paintings could be analysed both in terms of their regional historical milieux and in terms of formal polarities between linear form and painterly form, flatness and depth, and 'closed' (schematic) versus 'open' (illusionistic) form. Panofsky (1955) argued that pictorial analysis involved study of 'iconology' and 'iconography', based on close acquaintance with literary, biblical and mythological sources. Panofsky saw pictorial analysis as involving skills of deciphering symbolic systems in works of art, such as St Peter and his keys, St Sebastian and his arrows, Orpheus and his lyre, and so on.

It should be noted that the German art scholars were not exclusively concerned with painting and sculpture. They saw art as emerging from the entire material culture of historical life, in pottery, tapestry and architecture and the like; and they developed a rigorous methodology of formal analysis balanced with historical contextualization that emphasized cooperation between visual analysis and other disciplines of the human studies, such as anthropology and linguistics. Ernst Cassirer in particular linked art history to the more general study of symbols, language, myth, religion, science and philosophy. In his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1953) Cassirer argued that symbols structure and synthesize human beings' way of experiencing the world. Cassirer elaborated Immanuel Kant's conception of the dependence of human knowledge and experience of the world on concepts and categories supplied by the human mind. Cassirer affirmed that to study art history was to study one of the manifold respects in which human beings evolve ways of organizing their experience under constructions of the imagination, from the mythological belief-systems of archaic peoples to the abstract systems of modern logic, arithmetic, algebra and mathematics.

In chapter 2 we will discuss some criticisms of the German humanistic scholars revolving around claims that their underlying cultural values led them to take an unjustifiably eurocentric and patriarchal view of the relevant constituents of 'art'.

Marxist social history of art

Marxist social history and sociology of art refers to a range of scholars active from around the middle decades of the twentieth century. These scholars sought to tie the study of works of art and artists' lives to analysis of economic modes of material production and social class structures. Most of these scholars draw on concepts in Marxist historical theory, either directly or indirectly. They include historians such as Meyer Schapiro (1973), Arnold Hauser (1951), Frederick Antal (1948), Pierre Francastel (1956, 1970), Francis Klingender (1968), Jean Duvignaud (1972), Max Raphael (1968), Lucien Goldmann (1970) and others. Alongside these, we must also mention a wide variety of twentieth-century Marxist philosophers and critics of the arts. These range from Russian and Soviet figures such as Plekhanov and Trotsky to western European critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre, György Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertholt Brecht and Siegfried Kracauer. They also include the members of the Frankfurt School of social research, chiefly Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Leo Löwenthal. They include numerous French intellectuals associated with the movements of surrealism and situationism such as André Breton, Georges Bataille and Cornelius Castoriadis; and they include more recent historians and theorists such as John Berger (1972), T. J. Clark (1973, 1985) and Fredric Jameson (1984).

All these writers have propounded principles of materialist analysis that have since become more or less standard in sociological studies of the arts. They include the proposition that artists are not solitary individuals endowed with unique creative gifts but members of definite collectivities; that works of art are funded and purchased by social agents and institutions by payments in money or in kind; that works of art depend on material and technological media of production that presuppose social systems of labour; that works of art 'reflect' or 'encode' the social structures of their time in their aesthetic forms and contents; and that works of art carry values that are not necessarily valid for all time and may only be valid for particular social groups who 'consume' them in specific social settings.

These writers' contributions raise the question of the extent to which Marx's own writings provide grounds for a specifically Marxist approach to sociological studies of the arts. We will attempt a brief provisional response to this question here.

We should note first that Marx himself wrote little of any great note on individual works of art. Among Marx's few comments on works of art are some remarks on Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, a popular novel of the 1840s; some remarks on a play by Ferdinand Lassalle, leader of the German Social Democratic Party in the 1870s; some references to Shakespeare and Honoré de Balzac; and some unfinished notes on ancient Greek art and culture (Marx and Engels 1976). However, other passages of Marx's writings addressing questions of value, labour and sensuous well-being – notably in the *Grundrisse*, *Theories of Surplus Value* and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* – contain ideas which have provided a point of departure for much twentieth-century Marxist aesthetic theory. A preliminary summary of these ideas here will serve as a guide to our discussions later.

The most central proposition of classical Marxist thinking about art is that a society's ability to produce works of fine art is a privilege of its ruling classes. Peasants, serfs and factory workers are not in a position to produce works of fine art because they lack the time, leisure, material resources and advantages of technical know-how to do so. It is most obviously a privilege of the aristocracy because landowners are relieved of the necessity to earn a living. It is also a privilege of the middle classes because merchants, industrialists and employees of skilled professions are only compelled to sell the products of their labour, not their labour-power itself. Therefore they possess a degree of free time to acquire the means of producing art, such as materials, instruments and access to technical training and education.

A second central proposition of classical Marxist thinking about art is that in so far as exploited classes in society supply ruling classes with the necessities of life, the ability of the ruling classes to produce works of art presupposes an extraction of value from the life possibilities of the exploited classes. Value in art for the enjoyment of a few rests on an extraction of value from the material livelihood of the great mass in society. The existence of the Egyptian pyramids is founded on the labour of thousands of slaves. The existence of palaces and castles is founded on the labour of thousands of serfs. The ability of sons of industrialists to write love poetry, play the piano and paint pictures of Venus is founded on the

labour of thousands of workers in the factories. In a capitalist society, fine art is the spiritualized form of a quantity of extra labour-power and extra labour-time which has been extracted from the life horizons of the proletariat and converted into capital.

A third proposition in classical Marxist thinking is that works of art reflect the social class relations from which they derive in their aesthetic forms and contents. Visual and narrative contents reflect the interests of the ruling classes in maintaining their position of domination. They transmit the ideology of the ruling classes. However, they do not do so in a direct way. They do so only in an indirect way, by acts of intellectual mystification. Pre-communist art makes actually existing conditions of social order appear natural, eternal and unchangeable. Pre-communist art is in this respect comparable to religion, theology and metaphysical philosophy.

A fourth proposition in classical Marxist thinking is that pre-communist art is valuable for contemporary society only in so far as it is related to revolutionary struggle. Marx argued that ancient Greek art is meaningful to the present in so far as it reveals stages in the historical development of the human species towards communism. Proletarians can appreciate ancient Greek and high bourgeois art up to the point that they see dramatized in it the logic of class conflict and hence the early makings of their own historical predicament. Therefore pre-communist art still contains a potential moment of truth. But this potential moment of truth awaits redemption through revolutionary praxis.

We will be concerned at several places in this book with the ways in which twentieth-century theorists have criticized and qualified the more reductive tendencies of classical Marxist thinking about art. In chapter 3 we will assess Marxist theories of the determination of art by socioeconomic structures. In chapter 4 we discuss Marxist accounts of the thesis of 'aesthetic autonomy'. In chapter 5 we examine Marxist theories of ideology and utopia in art; and in chapters 6 and 7 we discuss Marxist positions in debates about modernity, modernism and postmodernism.

Cultural studies, cultural materialism and postmodernism

The variety of approaches associated with 'cultural studies' refers to the work of critics and theorists who have built on Marxist thinking but have sought to refine and combine Marxist ideas with other

theoretical sources. These include psychoanalysis, structural linguistics and semiotics, deconstruction, discourse analysis, poststructuralist criticism and feminist and postcolonial criticism. The broad unity of these approaches can be summed up in the concept of 'cultural materialism' – a term first coined by Raymond Williams (1981). Unlike Marx's historical materialism, cultural materialism does not hold class struggle to be the only and ultimate source of conditioning power over cultural life. Cultural materialism emphasizes other sites of struggle for recognition in culture bearing on issues of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Cultural materialism consequently recommends a more attenuated concept of ideology than that deployed in classical Marxist analysis. It does not directly associate ideology with 'false consciousness'. It rejects orthodox Marxist conceptions of cultural 'superstructures' determined by an economic 'base'; and it does not directly reduce cultural and aesthetic value to labour value. Drawing on figureheads such as Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, many cultural studies writers argue for concepts of 'hegemony' in culture that articulate relations of subordination and exclusion while at the same time mediating elements of dissent and contestation. Cultural forms are seen as transmitting power from some groups in society over others without necessarily revealing any single originating source of domination.

The rise of cultural studies occurred at a time when many university departments began to incorporate more explicitly political and theoretical approaches to the humanities than in earlier decades of the twentieth century. In the 1970s and 1980s teaching and research programmes began to explore issues such as the exclusion of women painters from traditional narratives of art history; the role of museums, galleries and academies in constructions of national canons and representations of other peoples; and the relationship of fine art forms to commercial art, advertising, fashion, industrial design and popular culture in the broadest sense. In Britain this was known as the 'New Art History' (Borzello and Rees 1986). In literary studies, influential movements have included the 'New Historicism' in Renaissance studies, which emphasized literary writers' involvements in negotiations with political and ecclesiastical authorities (Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000). Many critics have thematized issues of sexual politics and issues of national, ethnic and postcolonial identity (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985; Eagleton 1983). These interventions have been decisive in extending cultural analysis to include film, TV, video and the mass media, and lifestyle and consumption choices in general. They have placed fine art among the general 'signifying

practices' of society. Poetry is set alongside pulp fiction; painting alongside commercial photography; the string quartet alongside the folk singer and the rock video, and so on. It is in this sense that writers such as Stuart Hall (1980) and Michel de Certeau (1984) speak of popular culture as an activity of reading and assemblage, or *bricolage*, as much as one of consumption. Popular culture is seen not in terms of passive ingestion of ready-made symbols but in terms of a texture of everyday creativity.

A further aspect of the range of approaches encompassed under cultural studies is a certain association with 'postmodernism'. Postmodernism is a diffuse term which is by no means affirmed in any unequivocal way by cultural studies writers. However, it has some uses in designating a broad attitude of epistemological pluralism in contemporary cultural and political discourse. Postmodernism in social theory is associated with Jean-François Lyotard's (1984b: xxiv) conception of 'incredulity toward meta-narratives'. Postmodernism in art theory is associated with the dissolution of ideas of internal progressive development in artistic language. It is associated with the disappearance of any single dominant centre of artistic innovation since the 1970s. It is associated with a discrediting of prejudices in favour of 'depth', 'purity' and 'authenticity' in art over against surface, play, eclecticism and hybridization between genres, forms and materials. It is associated with the dissolution of binary oppositions between 'high culture' and 'low culture' and a blurring of art's boundaries into popular culture and the mass media.

Postmodernism first became current as a term in the 1970s when it was used to denote a new playful attitude in forms of architectural construction. Thereafter it spread rapidly to become a general concept of social science discourse in the 1980s. It is analysed in the commentaries of numerous critics such as Arthur Danto (1997), Andreas Huyssen (1986), Rosalind Krauss (1985), Hal Foster (1985), Fredric Jameson (1984, 1991) and David Harvey (1990). These commentaries challenge the discriminations of earlier twentieth-century social and aesthetic theorists in favour of autonomous fine art above 'kitsch' and 'mass culture'. They show how postmodernism signifies a break not only with metaphysical conceptions of art but also with eminently 'modernist' conceptions of normative sociohistorical development in art.

In chapter 7 we will argue that postmodernism should not be treated as a set of indisputable facts about the fate of contemporary culture. But we will emphasize that postmodernism enjoys real

existence in late twentieth-century aesthetic culture and therefore that its claims should be taken seriously. Elements of postmodernist thinking underpin each of the remaining three schools of approach to which we now turn.

Institutional theories of art in analytical philosophy

'Institutional theories of art' comprise a set of contributions by scholars trained not primarily as sociologists or as art historians but as philosophers. They are associated with writers in the tradition of Anglo-American analytical philosophy since the 1950s. The two most notable representatives of an institutional theory of art in this tradition are Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Other representatives of the tradition more generally include Richard Wollheim, Mary Mothersill, Stanley Cavell, Oswald Hanfling and B. R. Tilghman.

Many analytical philosophers of the arts take their point of departure from Ludwig Wittgenstein's analyses of ordinary language in his late philosophical writings of the 1930s to 1940s. Analytical philosophers invoke Wittgenstein's insights to show how the central problem in metaphysical conceptions of art lies in their attempt to define a *singular concept* of art. They show how standard logical procedures for defining concepts by stipulating 'necessary and sufficient conditions' are of little use in the case of 'art'. 'Necessary conditions' refer to properties that objects must possess in order to be examples of a concept X. Sufficient conditions refer to properties that make objects examples of X but need not be the only properties that make objects examples of X. If X is taken as a place-holder for 'art', it appears that metaphysical conceptions of art specify properties which satisfy only sufficient conditions for making objects examples of 'art', not *necessary* conditions for making them examples of 'art'. Properties of 'possessing beauty', 'imitating nature', 'creating a likeness' and 'giving pleasure to the eye' appear to suffice for making objects examples of 'art', but do not appear to be necessary for making them examples of 'art'. On the one hand, many other objects and entities also possess these properties but are not usually regarded as works of art. We may think of human faces, passport photos, motor-cars. On the other hand, works of art need not possess beauty in any essential sense; they might look grotesque, bleak or horrifying. Nor need they imitate or resemble anything; they could be abstract or expressionist. Nor need they give pleasure to the eye; they could be painful and discomfiting to look at (Hanfling 1992).

In place of this enterprise of conceptual definition of art, some analytical philosophers propose grammatical analysis of ordinary uses of the word 'art' in terms of what Wittgenstein called their 'family resemblance' to one another. Although Wittgenstein did not himself write about 'art' in this way, he pointed to uses of the word 'game' in ordinary language. Most speakers of language know how to use the word 'game' quite routinely, even though the word is very hard to define as a concept. Thus these writers suggest that just as Wittgenstein (1953: 67) showed how games are linked together only by 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing', so referents of the word 'art' lack any essential conceptual connection to one another but are nevertheless routinely understood by ordinary speakers of language.

Other philosophers, however, have argued that this suggestion is not without certain problems. For whereas the boundaries of the word 'game' are relatively taken for granted in social practice, the boundaries of the word 'art' are continually being extended and contested over time. Therefore it is not enough to assume that any competent speaker of language will routinely recognize referents of the word 'art'. Some people – most notably art critics and artists – may be more likely to see art in things in which other people may be more likely to see only bicycle saddles or sewing machines. Therefore it is necessary to analyse art not only in terms of uses of language but also in terms of changing contexts of institutional authority over uses of language. These considerations provide the starting-point for Danto's and Dickie's institutional theory.

Danto (1964) and Dickie (1974) propose that what distinguishes art from non-art is not anything that can be observed with the naked eye. Danto and Dickie argue that works of art are not distinguishable by any particular quality of material appearance. They are distinguishable solely by the decision of a certain social institution to *confer status* on them. This institution is called the 'art world'. The art world consists of artists, critics, curators, sponsors, agents, dealers, collectors. Only this institution can discriminate between two physically identical objects and determine that one of them is a work of art and the other not a work of art; for example, a brick or a beer can in a gallery as against a brick or a beer can at a building site. Dickie takes the action of the Dada artist Marcel Duchamp on presenting a men's urinal to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1920s, titled *Fountain* (see illustration 1). Duchamp's work was physically indistinguishable from an ordinary men's urinal in a cloakroom. Duchamp procured his object 'ready-made',



1 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917/1964. Glazed ceramic with black paint, 38.1 × 48.9 × 62.55 cm. Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco. Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2003

mass-produced in a ceramics factory; and it was (eventually) accepted by the gallery as art. Similarly, Danto takes the case of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* from 1964, consisting of plywood replicas of the famous cardboard cartons of soap scourers. Danto also observes that towards the end of the nineteenth century many western cities began to display objects in art galleries previously housed in museums of archaeology and anthropology. Danto argues that only a change of perception driven by actions of institutional authorities can explain this sudden creation of works of art out of objects hitherto constituted as non-art artefacts. Danto and Dickie conclude that art objects do not exist in the art gallery because they are art before they enter the gallery; they exist as art objects because they exist in the gallery, and because they are admitted to the gallery by authorities. In Dickie's words: 'A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred

upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)' (Dickie 1974: 34).

Dickie emphasizes that not anything can be a work of art if anyone says it is. Dickie acknowledges that simply saying something can indeed make something the case in the world. In 'speech-acts' such as 'I promise' or 'I apologize', the speaker does not merely describe a state of affairs in the world; the speaker creates that state of affairs in the act of uttering these words. In this sense the speech-act of declaring something a work of art can have a 'performative' effect that creates the fact of its own declaration – like the agreement of certain associations of people to accept certain pieces of paper as money. But Dickie stresses that in order for this performative effect to be socially valid, the speaker must hold a certain institutional authority and must make the declaration in an institutionally recognized setting. When a priest baptizes a child, the priest's utterance creates the social fact of the child's baptism, but only a priest can perform this act, and if anyone else uttered the priest's words, no such fact would be created. Thus those conferring status on objects must enjoy a certain social authority for the conferral to succeed.

In chapter 2 we will discuss some objections to Danto's and Dickie's theory. We will criticize their thesis that objects exist as art if, *and only if*, some formal art institution declares them to be art. However, we must acknowledge some insights in the general claim of their work that objects do not necessarily exist as art if their original makers and recipients possess no idea of them as 'art', or as candidates for 'art'. For example, African tribal dance masks are not necessarily art if the African tribespeople who made them do not, or did not, have some idea of them as 'art'. At the very least, they are not necessarily art in a traditional western metaphysical sense of 'art'. This observation is particularly emphasized by anthropological studies of art in indigenous societies, to which we now turn.

Anthropological studies of art

Anthropological studies of art in indigenous societies further help us see the extent to which western metaphysical conceptions of art and beauty reflect specific intellectual developments of their time and milieu and do not necessarily possess transcultural validity. They further help dissolve assumptions first entertained in

eighteenth-century Europe about a transcendental realm of experience called 'art', set apart from the rest of life. Anthropological studies typically concentrate on the place of the things, actions and experiences called 'art' within total cultural systems, alongside other social activities such as hunting, agriculture, eating, festival, play, trade, war, dance, worship and ritual. Classical studies in this vein include work by Franz Boas (1955) and Alfred Louis Kroeber (1957) on the material culture of the North American native peoples, as well as work by Claude Lévi-Strauss on symbolic kinship relations among South American Amazonian tribes.

Typical objects of anthropological analyses of art are designs and decorative patterns carved on tools and utensils, embroidery on clothing, body painting, masks and staffs, stone arrangements, cave paintings, and images on shields and weapons. These are typically seen as elements within communication systems revolving around signs and symbols of group territory, group totems and group clan and kin relations; or they are seen as elements within purposive action systems oriented to magic and sorcery. Much anthropological research focuses on close interactions between imitation, illustration and ornamentation and beliefs in spirits and cultic practices.

We will not be able to discuss all the many examples of anthropological studies here (see Coote and Shelton 1992). In the following we will briefly review the work of two representative authors: Clifford Geertz and Alfred Gell.

In his essay 'Art as a Cultural System' (1983) Clifford Geertz sets out a number of problems with mid twentieth-century structural-functional approaches to anthropological research on art. Geertz argues that structural-functional approaches to anthropology rest on some implicitly ethnocentric assumptions. They tend to assume that activities such as dancing, singing, weaving, pottery and horticulture carry no intrinsically 'artistic' meanings for the actors themselves. They explain such activities solely in terms of certain structural functions, such as functions of 'group socialization' and 'group differentiation'. Geertz criticizes these approaches by arguing that while no indigenous societies possess ideas of art directly comparable to western metaphysical ideas of art, it is not the case that such societies possess no ideas of artistic expression whatsoever. Geertz comments on the Yoruba tribe of Nigerian Africa who attach special significance to lines and linearity. The Yoruba carve lines in wood sculpture and paint lines on their faces. The Yoruba word for 'line' is the same as the Yoruba word for 'civilization'. The Yoruba mark 'civilization' by tracks slashed in the forest and boundaries

incised in the earth. Similarly, Geertz discusses the Abelam tribe of New Guinea who paint much of their houses and clothing in coloured oval shapes. The Abelam see these oval shapes as representations of the bellies of pregnant women. The Abelam believe that as men are born of women, so women created the vegetation that men eat, and further that women first encountered the spirit beings, which men turned into sculptures. Geertz argues that inasmuch as line carvings for the Yoruba enact their idea of civilization and oval paintings for the Abelam enact their idea of the womb of nature, they enact these ideas *immediately*. They are not merely functional outcomes of a system of social imperatives – to do, say, with forest clearance or sexual reproduction. In Geertz's words:

the central connection between art and collective life does not lie on . . . an instrumental plane, it lies on a semiotic one. . . . [T]he Yoruba's line arrangements do not . . . celebrate social structure or forward useful doctrines. They materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world, where men can look at it. (1983: 99)

Alfred Gell pursues a different but complementary approach influenced by studies of animistic belief-systems in tribal societies. In *Art and Agency* (1998) Gell proposes that art objects compose a socially constructed category of special objects endowed with magical or quasi-magical status. In both indigenous and developed western societies art objects are believed to possess special kinds of causal powers that mimic the causal powers of human persons. Gell proposes that art objects are objects that are experienced as carrying derivative causal agency with respect to their producers, their recipients and their subjects of presentation. They are objects from which members of social groups infer or 'abduct' certain originating processes, for which these objects are thought to stand as signs or 'indexes' and as transmitters of further effects. Thus the cartoon caricature transmits agency from the artist who produced it to the person it ridicules. The voodoo doll is experienced as exerting agency over the real person it is held to embody. The sacred stone or piece of sacred wood or surrealist 'found object' compels the artist to display it or craft it in a particular way. The sacred stone or piece of sacred wood or surrealist 'found object' also moves its intended recipients into states of awe and veneration. Art objects also transmit agency from the recipients for whom they are made to the artists who make them. A patron may oblige a painter to represent the

patron in the painting. In many portrait images, both the intended recipient and the intended subjects of the images imprint themselves in the forms of the canvas. Gell concedes that none of these cases are comparable to first-order intentional action by persons. They are derivative cases of agency, and they all depend on the mediating causal agency of the artist. However, Gell insists that they are still genuine cases of agency and are not irrational reifications.

Gell's proposal goes some way towards showing how anthropological ideas of art in terms of a socially generated category of magical or quasi-magical objects applies to modern western contexts of art as much as to indigenous contexts. This ethnographic way of thinking is explicitly pursued by many contemporary empirical sociologists of western arts institutions, to whose work we turn finally.

Empirical sociology of contemporary arts institutions

Empirical sociology of arts institutions refers to a type of research dating from around the 1960s and 1970s onwards by scholars trained primarily as social scientists. It is based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of arts markets, arts employment structures, arts administration, specialist arts networks and arts consumption patterns. This research differs from Marxist social history of art in that it is more consistently value-distancing in its methods. It is more consistently oriented to abstention from value-judgement, and it usually eschews questions of aesthetic evaluation. It also differs from cultural materialist approaches by scholars trained primarily in humanities disciplines in that it focuses less on aesthetic contents in works of art and more on behavioural and institutional practices of public arts reception. The research may be seen in terms of a variety of projects of empirical application of the institutional theories of Danto and Dickie. It is represented mostly by a network of researchers from the US and a network of researchers from France. Both networks show affinities with social constructionist approaches to the study of science, such as in the work of Bruno Latour and the Edinburgh school of the sociology of science. The American network has strong connections with traditions of ethnomethodology and participant observation. It is particularly represented by the work of Howard Becker (1982). The French network has similarly strong ties to sociological ethnography, in the tradition of the journal founded by Émile Durkheim, the *Années Sociologiques*. It is particularly represented by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. A brief

overview of the work of the main contributors here will serve to make these orientations clear.

In his book *Art Worlds* (1982), Howard Becker makes use of Danto's and Dickie's institutional theory and symbolic interactionist sociological theory to develop a value-neutral account of the place of the arts in society. Becker argues that art is less a history of outstanding creations by visionary individuals than a social configuration of practices guided by social conventions. Works of art are products of cooperative activity between networks of actors; and artists are only one type of actor within these networks. The networks include other actors such as dealers, agents, patrons, critics, curators, publishers and promoters. Becker notes the vast army of personnel required to script, direct, produce, edit and distribute films; the equally vast membership of ballet and theatre companies and classical orchestras; and the wide range of technicians, assistants, engineers, printers, editors and suppliers of equipment and materials who support painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, musicians and singers. Becker argues that these actors' activities are not secondary or exterior to the work of artists. Artists should be seen as conditioned in their actions by at least four main sets of social relations: by shared conventions and norms of art worlds; by material media and technologies of production; by patrons, sponsors and art markets; and by public tastes and public channels of reception in general. Becker contends that once these circumstances are identified, sociologists are equipped to explain why artists produce particular works in particular ways at particular times and places, and why they come to prominence at particular times and places. Sociologists help us to see how artists' reputations are made less by any gifts of 'genius' than by such unspectacular contingencies as shifts and fashions in the distribution of patronage and publicity. According to Becker:

Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artefacts. The same people often cooperate repeatedly, even routinely, in similar ways to produce similar works, so that we can think of an art world as an established network of cooperative links among participants. . . . Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, 'artists' who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all

the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence. (Becker 1982: 34–5)

Becker's work stands behind a number of recent American cultural sociologists concerned with social relations in the organization of artistic work; with social relations in the construction of art genres and classifications; and with class and status differences in distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture and in public arts consumption in general. Particular studies have concentrated on interactions between galleries, collectors, dealers and auction houses in the shaping of market demands and market prices for particular artists and art styles and movements, as well as on arts funding policies and arts education policies, and on the impact of processes of institutional professionalization, bureaucratization and commercialization on arts workers. These include studies by Blau (1989), Crane (1987), DiMaggio (1982, 1987), Dubin (1987), P. P. Clark (1987), Gans (1999), Griswold (1986), Halle (1993), Larson (1993), Levine (1988), Peterson (1986, 1997), White and White (1965) and Zolberg (1990). We will discuss some of these studies at length in chapters 3 and 4.

The French school consists of similar empirical studies of arts administration and status and prestige distribution in social classifications of cultural goods. Particular studies have concentrated on relations between art and money in the rise of commercial art markets since the nineteenth century and their impact on the celebrity of artists and art works, as well as on genre choices by artists in terms of career prospects. The French sociologists show how arts markets and patronage systems function as variables of the field of cultural production, constituting and differentiating the field's codes and delimiting the direction of artistic creativity. They show how artists shape and supply niches in cultural markets in response to changing patterns of audience expectation. The research is comparable to some extent to the French *Annales* school of historians in its use of quantitative frames of analysis, but it also has roots in a French anthropological tradition reaching back to the work of Marcel Mauss on gift exchange. More recently, it has developed in conjunction with analysis of competing 'discourses of justification' in social valuations of symbolic goods, such as in the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991). At the centre of this research stands the figure of Pierre Bourdieu, whose work we discuss at length in chapter 4. But it is also represented by other important studies by Chiapello (1998), Heinrich (1998), Menger (1983), Menger and

Ginsburgh (1996), Moulin (1986, 1987), Hennion (1993) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1979).

The French and American sociologists bring to fulfilment the concerns of earlier generations of social historians of art with a non-metaphysical and non-ethnocentric understanding of art in society. They develop empirical research programmes consonant with the concerns of cultural studies writers, with institutional theories of art in analytical philosophy, and with the stock of concepts in anthropological studies of art. In later chapters we will explore both the strengths and some limitations of this work in relation to questions of aesthetic meaning and value in works of art.

Conclusion

We have introduced a range of approaches to sociological understanding of the arts that pose challenges to long-standing metaphysical conceptions of art. These challenges reveal the shortcomings of metaphysical ideas that seek to define art in terms of one-sided prescriptive norms and essences. Metaphysical conceptions rest on attempts to define art in terms of sets of criteria that cannot be satisfied in sociohistorical reality without rather distorting and exclusionary consequences. In contrast, sociological approaches generally possess a stronger sense of the material preconditions, historical flux and cultural diversity of discourses, practices and institutions of art. We should, however, stress that it would be wrong to conclude that metaphysical conceptions lack relevance to contemporary understandings of art, or that ideas of beauty, mimesis and aesthetic experience are meaningless ways of appreciating and thinking about art. Metaphysical conceptions are not inferior to sociological conceptions in any ultimate sense. They are simply different conceptions, which emerge from different historical universes of thought. In later parts of this book, we will argue that sociology of the arts is most informative for experience when it seeks to reconstruct the best insights of metaphysical conceptions concerning value and meaning in art at the same time as renouncing their more essentializing prescriptions in these regards. In the next chapter we discuss some first steps towards this position by investigating some essentially contested dimensions of *value* and *valuation* in art in relation to questions of politics and aesthetics.