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The Persistence of the Art Myth

To tear the entire human race from its animal state, only two conditions were required; that the relics of dead clerics – paintings, books, statues – should be preserved in supervised premises; and that at least one living cleric should remain to carry on the task and manufacture future relics.

Squalid nonsense.

Jean Paul Sartre¹

I stopped believing in art not long after I started studying art history. There were too many conflicting definitions of art espoused by artists and others professionally involved: art for some was “high”, above the fray of everyday life, and yet, for others, it was necessarily engaged with politics. Art was often supposed to be divined by those with a “good eye” while, on the other hand, connoisseurship was condemned as bourgeois. I could have chosen sides; I could have been a devotee of Art for Art’s Sake, a romantic soul on the barricades or a member of some post-modernist clique, but instead I became the artistic equivalent of an atheist.

In the late 1980s, teaching art history at the University of London, I always began my courses with the confession that I was a non-believer. Then, for more than thirty-five years, I travelled along a curatorial road, working for not-for-profit art galleries and museums, not once denying my lack of faith. The programmes I devised were meant to encourage a philosophical scepticism with respect to art and its institutions. I loved what I did – the exhibitions, the performances, the public projects, the provision of social space – all of it done, paradoxically, in spite of art.

Art is a European myth. Japan had managed very well without art – Japan had no word for art – until it opened up to western influence in the mid-19th century. Yes, there were painters, ceramicists, sculptors, printmakers, makers of wonderful things, but it never occurred to them that they were “artists”. And then what difference did art make? Japanese painters, for example, started to make work that looked increasingly Western, and an art market began to develop as museums and galleries sprang up in Japan to become part of an international art economy. The otherness of Japanese culture, so attractive to Monet, van Gogh, Whistler and their contemporaries, was thus diminished in the name of art.² To be clear, I’m not a purist and more than happy with cross-cultural influences to the extent that cultural appropriation doesn’t bother me particularly, but art evangelism is something else – a kind of colonisation by art missionaries – and that is what had happened.

¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Words*, Penguin, London 2000, p.112

² See ‘Bijutsu: The Key Issue of Contemporary Japanese Art’, abstract of lecture by Kiyoko Mitsuyama-Wdowiak, Universiteit Leiden, 26 April 2026, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/events/2026/04/bijutsu-the-key-issue-of-contemporary-japanese-art>: “The Japanese term *bijutsu* (美術) designates ‘fine art’ in the Western sense, commonly used in Japan. However, it did not exist in premodern Japan until it was coined in the early Meiji period (1868-1912). By using this term, the Meiji government promoted Western notions and practices of fine art through art institutions as part of their modernisation of the country. This historical fact has profoundly influenced the creative identity of Japanese artists, causing significant artistic issues including the role of traditional aesthetics and the inferior status of crafts.” Accessed 28 April 2026

The rise of art and European empire building went hand in hand, and a proliferation of art museums was symptomatic. The Louvre was not the first, but it is a very pertinent case in point. Once a palatial residence, it became a museum for monuments and other items wrested from a royalist establishment during the French Revolution, with an idea that they would lose their aristocratic aura by being corralled. But instead of shining as a symbol of Republican idealism, the Louvre became a repository and defining institution of high art, with those all-too-familiar trappings of exclusivity, topped up by masterpieces looted during Napoleon's military campaigns, especially in northern Europe and Italy. It became a palace of culture.

Various committees were set up to direct the Louvre, to organise displays and work out building alterations accordingly. Concerning the latter, artist Hubert Robert was busy envisaging various renovations for existing interiors. In the 1796 Paris Salon he exhibited *Projet d'aménagement de la Grande Galerie*, a painting that proposed skylights for an effective illumination of the collection, while maintaining a dramatic sweep of space. It was a fairly straightforward proposal, unlike that of another painting he exhibited at the Salon that year: *Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie en ruines*.

This imaginary view, inspired by the ruins of classical antiquity, such as those encountered on a Grand Tour, implies an eventual decline and fall. We see here the Louvre as a crumbling wreck, with Robert's skylights collapsed amidst the Corinthian columns, broken arches and statuary that, it turns out, had signified nothing but hubris. As with empires, so too with art. When contemporary activists speak of "decolonising" art museums, perhaps they should go further, thinking beyond the contents and seriously consider the dismantling of the museums themselves.

Art, as a concept we would now recognise, came into being during Hubert Robert's lifetime, and there would have been no reason for him to think that it would last forever. It could have been like adolescence, a phase that society was going through.³

Since Robert's painting of the Louvre in ruins, there have been many artists who imagined a world without art. In the nineteenth century, for example, William Morris' Arts and Crafts tendency culminated in *News From Nowhere*, a utopian romance in which the Arts were deemed redundant. He talks of a revolution, the "great change", preceded by a capitalist society in which there was "the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces."⁴

Twenty-seven years later Marcel Duchamp submitted *Fountain*, a "readymade" urinal he'd bought in a hardware shop, to be included in the New York Society of Independent Artists' inaugural exhibition. It wasn't shown but is now widely acknowledged as a major artistic achievement, and thus provides indisputable evidence that art has no intrinsic quality but, rather, exists in the mind – the "grey matter" – of the beholder.⁵ In 1926, Theo van Doesberg, leading exponent of De Stijl movement, argued for the "End of Art":

Let us refresh ourselves with things that are not Art: the bathroom, the W.C., the bathtub, the telescope, the bicycle, the auto, the subways, the flatiron.

There are many people who know how to make such good unartistic things.

But they are hindered, and their movements are dictated by the priest of Art. Art, whose function nobody knows, hinders the function of life.

³ It is impossible to pinpoint a time and place for the invention of art, but *Les beaux arts réduit à un même principe* (The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle) (1746) a treatise by French philosopher Charles Batteux is often cited as the first widely read account of the "fine arts" as a separate, and privileged, category of creativity.

⁴ William Morris, 'News from Nowhere', *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, Penguin, London 1993, p. 160

⁵ Those who deny such implications must deny that *Fountain* is a work of art. See Damon Young & Graham Priest, 'It is and it isn't', *Aeon Newsletter*, 22 September 2016: <https://aeon.co/essays/how-can-duchamp-s-fountain-be-both-art-and-not-art>.

For the sake of progress, we must destroy Art.⁶

It is significant that at the birth of modernism artists such as van Doesberg and Duchamp were working seriously to undermine art; van Doesberg arguably as a more aggressive exponent of Morris' idealism, while Duchamp eschewed any equation of art and the way things looked, especially if there was an appeal to "aesthetic delectation".

The radicalism of *Fountain* is still keenly felt, despite the fact that it was made – found "readymade", then "aided" – as long ago as the amount of time that had elapsed between then and the date of Robert's *Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie en ruines*. Duchamp's argument against the existence of art in the real "object" world is as unassailable as the theory of evolution against intelligent design. And yet art goes on, from strength to strength, with more art museums being built than ever before, more galleries and art fairs, more auction records broken, more and more artists. The question is, why? Why is the art myth so persistent?

Like van Doesberg, with his obvious distaste for the "priest of Art"⁷, I stopped believing as it occurred to me that art was like religion. The tendency to treat art objects as holy relics, valuable because they somehow embody the presence of an artist (saint-like) is at the heart of the problem, and so museums have the attraction of churches and temples, and curators function like priests. Art works are sold to collectors, like indulgences, with the promise of a brighter future because art is good. Our coexistence with it is supposed to improve the quality of our lives.

By no means have van Doesberg and I been lone voices in drawing attention to the religious nature of art. An oft-made observation, sometime critique, it is comfortably accommodated by the art establishment. And so Michael Craig-Martin's sculptural installation, *An Oak Tree*, is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, and an artist's copy is on loan to the Tate Gallery.

Comprising a glass of tap water on a glass shelf, *An Oak Tree* could not be more transparently what it is, but then there is an accompanying text, exhibited alongside, that asserts it as an oak tree. In the form of an interview, it poses reasonable questions that are answered by the artist, as summarised by the following extract:

Q: Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A: No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into an oak tree.

Q: It looks like a glass of water ...

A: Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water. It's an oak tree.

This exchange is smart. Not only because of the questions it raises around the use of readymades in art, but also the correspondence it clearly suggests between artistic experience and religious faith. The obvious artistic precedent is *Fountain* – while van Doesberg refers to "the bathroom, the W.C., the bathtub" – but instead of being a receptacle and drain for fluid released by the human body, Craig-Martin's found object takes us back to the start of the biological process, a drinking vessel, and the drink on this occasion is pure unadulterated water.

As Duchamp refers to his urinal as a "fountain", Craig-Martin is especially insistent on his glass of water being an oak tree. And it is not a symbol of an oak tree. It *is* an oak tree. "Isn't this a case of the emperor's new clothes?", Craig-Martin asks himself. The answer? "No. With the emperor's new clothes people claimed to see something which wasn't there because they felt they should. I would be very surprised if anyone told me they saw an oak tree." Duchamp was daring his audience to see a work of art in an object not intended as a work of art, a piece of toilet furniture. Craig-Martin, on the other hand, is talking about some kind of transubstantiation.

⁶ Theo van Doesberg, 'The End of Art', *De Stijl*, vol. 7, nr 73/74, Leiden 1926, pp. 29–30

⁷ Ibid. p.29

Transubstantiation is the miraculous transformation of wine into the blood of Christ, and bread into His body during the Roman Catholic service of the Eucharist. Nothing changes the appearance or molecular make-up of the wine and bread. They don't taste different. Our senses tell us that there is absolute continuity between what has gone before and what is happening now, but we "know" that they have become the blood and the body of the Son of God, and that by their consumption we are absolved of sin and thus made acceptable for heaven.

Michael Craig-Martin's *Oak Tree* has autobiographical interest, reflecting as it does the artist's particular Christian background, but beyond this are its implications for artistic experience in general, the necessary (if not sufficient) factor of faith whereby not only is art identified as art, but also deemed good for us, better than non-art, and somehow transcendental. Like religion, the art world capitalises on mystery, and this is possible especially due to the indefinable nature of its commodity. For a long time we've acknowledged that art does not have a distinct look or material quality, or even need to have an artist's touch. It can comprise the most ordinary mass-produced drinking glasses and shelves. An art object doesn't have to be well-made or a fine thing. Art can lie in absence. Art doesn't have to be an object, and visual art doesn't even have to be visual.

There is nothing inherent in art that makes it different to anything else. It is interesting to speculate on the kind of observations that an extraterrestrial visitor would make on arrival in our world, encountering for the first time the multifarious products of a culture that we tend to take for granted. Any discrimination we might make between high art and popular culture, including signage, advertising and so on, would elude them. In an art world that accommodates Jeff Koons, through museum retrospectives and acquisitions, they would have no understanding of the hierarchy that builds up from kitsch to those revered products of human ingenuity we call masterpieces. And what exactly is the problem with fakes? Why does a painting lose millions of euros in value when it is discovered not to be by its previously acknowledged old master.

Recent research undertaken by art historian Martin Kemp, in collaboration with a number of scientists at the University of Oxford, is grist to my mill. It provides conclusive evidence that individuals who think they are looking at copies or fakes have distinctly different neurological responses to those who believe they are in the presence of an authentic, original work of art.⁸ Those participating in a carefully conducted experiment were exposed to images of both Rembrandt originals and copies, and resulting fMRI brain scans revealed how much the enjoyment of art is influenced by given information. If someone is convinced they are looking at an authentic Rembrandt, whether or not it is a copy, a part of their brain is activated – specifically the orbito-frontal cortex – which signals sheer pleasure, often associated with reward and monetary gain. This doesn't happen for those who believe they are looking at a copy, or a fake: they are busy instead "hypothesising" – especially with their frontopolar cortex – trying to work out exactly what it is they are looking at. Kemp explains:

Our findings support what art historians, critics and the general public have long believed - that it is always better to think we are seeing the genuine article.

Our study shows that the way we view art is not rational, that even when we cannot distinguish between two works, the knowledge that one was painted by a renowned artist makes us respond to it very differently.

The fact that people travel to galleries around the world to see an original painting suggests that this conclusion is reasonable.⁹

⁸ Mengfei Huang, Holly Bridge, Martin J. Kemp and Andrew J. Parker, 'Human cortical activity evoked by the assignment of authenticity when viewing works of art', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 28 November 2011 (doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2011.00134)

⁹ Sean Coughlan, 'Fake Paintings trick viewers in brain scan test', *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16032234>. Accessed 14 January 2026

Surely the opposite conclusion is more reasonable. People don't need to burn through thousands of air miles in order to see an original painting. Rather, they simply need to believe, wherever they are, that they are having an authentic artistic experience. Either that, or come to the realisation that there is no such thing.

The behaviour of human beings in relation to what they believe to be real works of art – the jostling crowds around the Mona Lisa, now requiring a renovation of the Louvre – would intrigue our extraterrestrial visitor. They would want to know why we were spinning this “art” story around something so fugitive, and deduce that it called for anthropological research, rather than a study of aesthetics.

Cue Alfred Gell. He finished writing *Art and Agency*, his extraordinary book proposing an anthropological theory of visual art, just before his untimely death in 1997. In an introductory chapter he invites the reader to consider what anthropologists do best from the viewpoint of neighbouring disciplines: “Anthropology is, to put it bluntly, considered good at providing close-grained analyses of apparently irrational behaviour, performances, utterances etc.”¹⁰ He cites the classic “my brother is a green parrot” problem, pointing up the seeming absurdity of beliefs pervasive in African culture. The resemblance of the brother/parrot statement to “this glass of water is an oak tree” goes without saying. The idea that Michael Craig-Martin's *Oak Tree* is a work of art is equally irrational.

Concerned to account for the global phenomenon of art, he rejects the equation of art and aesthetics in light of the religious nature of artistic experience

[...] I cannot tell between religious and aesthetic exaltation; art lovers, it seems to me, actually do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their *de facto* idolatry by rationalising it as aesthetic awe. Thus, to write about art at all is, in fact, to write about either religion, or the substitute for religion which those who have abandoned the outward forms of received religions content themselves with. The Protestant-Puritan heritage combined with a special form of art-theoretical casuistry have established a special form of bad faith about the “power of images” in the contemporary Western world [...] We have neutralised our idols by reclassifying them as art; but we perform obeisances before them every bit as deep as those of the most committed idolator before his wooden god.¹¹

Gell's essay, ‘Vogel's Net’¹², published a year earlier is a lively attempt to answer the question, “what is an artwork?” It centres on an exhibition, *Art/Artifact*, curated by Susan Vogel for the Center for African Art, New York (1988) that featured amongst other things a traditional African hunting net, an object made without any artistic intention, let alone any understanding of art. Now bound up and translated into a museum space in one of the major art cities of the world, it could be easily mistaken for a work of art in the style of artists such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Windsor and so, Gell asked, what exactly was the difference and what could this encounter with the hunting net tell us about our definitions of art.

Gell applies modern Western logic in his hunt for the elusive definition, and considers three options: firstly, that a work of art “can be defined as any object that is aesthetically superior, having certain qualities of visual appealingness [sic.] or beauty”. An admirer of Duchamp, he gives this short shrift. Next up is the “interpretative” theory, much more “attuned to the realities of the present day world”; that is to say, that a work of art can only be interpreted as such “in the light of a system of ideas that is founded within an art historical tradition”¹³. This gives way through an argument that insists essentially on a mental trip to a place beyond Western culture to what he refers to as the “institutional” theory, whereby “a work may be in origin unconnected with the mainstream of art history, but if the art world co-opts the work, and circulates it as art, then it is

¹⁰ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, p.10

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.97

¹² Alfred Gell, ‘Vogel's Net. Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps’, *The Anthropology of Art. A Reader*, eds H Morphy & M Perkins, Blackwell Publishing, 2006

¹³ *Ibid.* p.219

art”.¹⁴ And so art snares the African hunting net; also Japanese woodblock prints, cave paintings and, well, almost anything now appreciated as art that was made before the late eighteenth century.¹⁵

Gell was at odds with art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto who wrote an essay for the *Art/Artifact* exhibition catalogue. Danto could not accept the hunting net as art because its creation had nothing to do with the “art world” – a word, incidentally, invented by Danto – and the art world is a place where “the universal” is addressed. The hunting net is like a knife or a hairpin, “objects whose meaning is exhausted in their utility. Universality belongs after all to thoughts and propositions, and no one would have supposed that knives or nets or hairpins express universal content. They are what they are used for, but artworks have some higher role, putting us in touch with higher realities; they are defined through the possession of meaning. They are to be explained through what they express.”¹⁶ Before arriving at this conclusion, Danto performs a feat of academic gymnastics, imagining two African tribes, the Pot People and the Basket Folk, who make identical pots and baskets but see these objects very differently because of creation stories told by priest-like “Wise Persons”.

The Basket Folk, for example, “if they had the words, [...] would describe baskets as art works, and their pots as artefacts. The baskets, in any case, belong to what Hegel has called Absolute Spirit: a realm of being which is that of art, religion, and philosophy. The pots are merely part of what, with his genius for phrase, he spoke of as the Prose of the World.” It is a question not what the baskets of the Basket Folk look like – and, likewise, the pots of the Pot People – but rather the way they are perceived: as “having a spiritual identity altogether lacking in the interdiscernable objects from the other tribe.”¹⁷ He brings missionaries, museums and ancient Greeks into his argument, at length, but the basic question remains: what if we don’t share the notions of universality and a spiritual dimension as espoused by the Wise Persons? What if we simply don’t believe or care about them?

Gell’s rejoinder to Danto is nicely straightforward: “when you come down to it, the reason that [he] excludes the ‘net’ as art is that he cannot imagine a wise man [or Wise Person] who might be able to tell him a tale sufficiently compelling to induce him to think otherwise; he assumes that because it is a net, and nets are used for hunting, and hunting is a means of obtaining food, ergo the net is a mere tool, like a cheese-grater.”¹⁸

The wise persons of the artworld – curators, gallerists, artists themselves – must inspire faith in order for art to exist or to mean anything. They need to be believed.

In his 1993/94 essay ‘Miraculous Cures and the Canonization of Basquiat’, Brian Eno recounts the story of Richard Williams, a music journalist who received pre-release test pressings – two single-sided discs – of a new record by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. The “B” sides consisted of 20-minute continuous tones that sound engineers had cut into the vinyl in order to monitor turntable stability and vinyl quality, but Williams mistook them for experimental minimalist works by John and Yoko and wrote a favourable review. Describing an oscillation that “produces an almost subliminal, uneven ‘beat’, which maintains interest”, he was listening to pure sine waves but heard the artists’ latest offerings.

Eno resists the temptation to join in a chorus of laughter at the expense of Williams, the critic who mistook a test tone, “that most deliberately artless of all sounds, for a piece of real art [...] why shouldn’t [he] have had a musical experience with a test tone? And doesn’t the fact that he

¹⁴ Ibid. p.220

¹⁵ See Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2001

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, ‘Artifact and Art’, *Art/Artifact*, exhibition catalogue, Center for African Art, New York, p.31

¹⁷ Ibid. p.24

¹⁸ Alfred Gell, ‘Vogel’s Net’, *Op. cit.* p.225

obviously did tell us something about the nature of art experiences in general?”¹⁹ Elsewhere in the essay, he asks, “How actively will we embrace ‘placebo effects’?”

Eno was writing this around the time he was invited to announce the 1995 Turner Prize winner at Tate in London and make a speech. He was determined to raise questions about “art and its place in our lives”:

[...] the intellectual climate surrounding the fine arts is so vaporous and self-satisfied that few of these questions are ever actually addressed, let alone answered [...] why have the sciences yielded great explainers like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Gould, while the arts routinely produce some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known to history? Why has the art world been unable to articulate any kind of useful paradigm for what it is doing now?

[...] there could and should be a comprehensive public discussion about what art does for us, what is being learned from it, what it might enable us to do or think or feel that we couldn’t before.²⁰

Eno revealed that Damien Hirst had won the 1995 Turner Prize and a year later, on form, Alfred Gell was asking what exactly was the difference between a shark suspended in a glass tank of formaldehyde and an Australian aboriginal painting of a trapped shark.²¹

The 1990s were heady days in London, and I was lucky to be there, getting into my stride as a curator. At the same time, Michael Craig-Martin’s crop of “Young British Artists”, including Hirst, had just graduated from Goldsmiths College. Duchamp was all the rage, and readymades or found objects – sharks, even! – were ubiquitous in the artworld. “Anything Goes” was a postmodern credo and the feeling overall was one of aesthetic freedom. It is interesting that Eno referred to Richard Dawkins, an unashamed atheist, as an inspiration. If his kind of critical thinking had been then brought to bear on art and its institutions, and taken on board, probably I wouldn’t now be feeling so motivated to write this essay.

Dawkins wants to strip things down to what makes sense in terms of science. Whatever can’t be observed or proved remains in the vast realm of future discoveries, not to be accounted for through leaps of faith. He sees nothing virtuous in faith, and encourages us to not only accept that we live in the midst of known and unknown unknowns, but also to appreciate what we encounter here and now, rather than defer our happiness until some imaginary afterlife. Dawkins is positivist and positive, asserting that what we do know is easily wonderful enough and that we should have no need to invent a god or gods in order to enhance the quality of human existence.

Eno joked in his Turner Prize speech that he didn’t have enough time on that occasion to articulate a theory of art – “if I had another two minutes of your time I’d have a go” – and until recently he held back. Last year saw the publication of his book *what art does: an unfinished theory*, co-written with Dutch artist Bette A, and its contents could not be more disappointingly familiar. In the format of a self-help book for children, it sets out to answer the questions:

What does art do?

And why do we need it?

A statement near the start is promising: “Art is the name we give to a certain kind of experience [...] a kind of experience we have with something”, but then the authors fall back on the nineteenth century aestheticist definition of art whereby it is assumed to exist in inverse proportion to utility: “The less functional a thing is – the less it has to do something in particular – the more space for art there is in it; the more freedom there is in it.” It’s the difference between the blade and the handle of a screwdriver: the blade has to function efficiently, but, hey, the handle could be “striped or speckled or multicoloured or opaque”.²² Where Eno and Bette A equate art

¹⁹ Brian Eno, ‘Miraculous Cures and the Canonization of Basquiat’, Brian Eno’s Diary 1995. A Year with Swollen Appendices, Faber & Faber, London 2023, pp.375–76

²⁰ Ibid. p.258

²¹ Alfred Gell, ‘Vogel’s Net’, Op. cit. p.229

²² Brian Eno and Bette A., *what art does: an unfinished theory*, Faber & Faber, London 2025, p.14

with freedom, Danto would have invoked universality and higher realities. Instead of a screw-driver blade, beyond the realms of art, Danto had Vogel's net.

Eno and Bette A distinguish between art and science; the latter aspiring to the condition of testability, whereas art places more emphasis on the importance of feeling. "Feelings generated by art aren't always nice feelings, but they won't hurt you"²³ and then, at another level, "Art changes how we feel about our feelings."²⁴ Things get more eat/love/pray towards the end when the authors consider the ways in which art can change us: "Art makes communities [...] [It] is one of the things that binds people together [...] It's a way of saying: I belong with this body of ideas and feelings [...]"²⁵ In this respect, at least, the authors concur with Alfred Gell: art *is* a tribal thing.

Eno's "unfinished theory" is a far cry from the radical implications of his essay on miraculous cures. In the clear light of day we see art as the placebo it is, something that makes a difference to us because we believe it will. We know that a lot of art is not good, but cling to the idea that it is good that it is art. On the other hand, there are a lot of good things, things that make a beneficial difference to us – things that are aesthetically appealing, inspiring, deeply philosophical and so on – that have nothing to do with art. This is a liberating (obvious, undeniable) realisation, and significantly it arises out of the art world itself, from William Morris, through van Doesberg, and onwards.

There are many artists since the 1990s who have made work that emphatically challenges ideas about art to the extent that, in an article for *Frieze* magazine in 2014, I argued that they were "anticipating the end of the art world as we know it". I quoted German artist Tino Sehgal:

Our culture is hung up on and overemphasises what can be derived from material objects [...] this is something quite new, over the past 200 or 300 years – that life has become about accumulating material wealth. The 21st century is not about accumulating material wealth like the 20th century. It's already eroding. I'm not against material things – I just don't work with them.²⁶

Grayson Perry, on the other hand, does. He had recently curated a remarkable exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (2011) that combined the work of a celebrity artist – his own – with that of countless anonymous individuals who from time immemorial have made non-art objects that occur to us as being worthy of the kind of attention lavished on acknowledged masterpieces. And, likewise, Jeremy Deller, who consistently tests notions of artistic authorship through collaboration with others who are not artists, knowingly playing off the aura of the museum – and other dedicated art spaces – leads us to the inescapable conclusion that artists are not particularly special, but simply individuals with a brand and job description that suit our kind of society.

Significantly, Perry and Deller have craft-oriented art practices. They make what philosopher Larry Shiner refers to as "craft-as-art", Perry most famously for his ceramics and tapestries. But, as Shiner observes, rather than effecting a rapprochement between fine art and craft, "the actual effect of [craft-as-art] has been to divide the studio crafts themselves into art and craft approaches."²⁷ Perry was a winner of the Turner Prize, whereas countless other ceramicists, more skilled, would never be considered.

Shiner is particularly concerned with the distinction between art and craft, and his impressive, invaluable book *The Invention of Art* (2001) includes a chapter entitled 'Beyond Art and Craft'. In a careful consideration of "primitive art" he namechecks Susan Vogel and Arthur Danto – but not Alfred Gell – and amusingly conveys the confusion that often results from the imposition of

²³ Ibid. p.30

²⁴ Ibid. p.80

²⁵ Ibid. p.94

²⁶ Quoted in Jonathan Watkins, 'Art and its Objects', *Frieze*, January 2013

²⁷ Larry Shiner, Op. cit., p.274

Western cultural values onto non-Western communities: “A State Arts Council representative in Alaska, for example, had to explain constantly to Alaskan Inuits in the 1980s that ivory carving and beadwork could be supported ‘as art’ but not kayak or harpoon making.”²⁸ Shiner quotes Michael LaCapra, an illustrator and story teller of mixed Apache, Hopi and Tewa heritage, who was understandably unhappy at the prospect of an alien categorisation of his people’s creativity:

What do we call a piece of work created by the hands of my family. In my home we call it pottery painted with designs to tell us a story. In my mother’s house we call it a wedding basket to hold blue corn meal [...] In my grandma’s place we call it a Kachina doll, a carved image of a life force that holds the Hopi world in place. We make pieces of life to see, touch and feel. Shall we call it “Art”? I hope not.²⁹

We imagine that the Kachina doll, appealing to the universal, would have gained admittance into Danto’s art world, but the wedding basket – not made by the Basket Folk and probably too functional – might have had difficulty. Shiner goes on to draw out various paradoxes and contradictions from the ongoing polarisation of art and craft – the irrationality of it all! – but admits that the presumed superiority of one always trumps the other. In the case of craft-as-art, it is always art that dictates the terms. Art-as-craft has yet to emerge as a cultural force ...

Shiner would like to “heal the fracture” between art and craft: “The answer to art divided is obviously not to reject such ideals as freedom, imagination, and creativity but to unite them with facility, service, and function.”³⁰ This is a strange proposition, reiterating the existing polarity and clearly at odds with common sense because art by no means has a monopoly on “freedom, imagination and creativity”. We know that most works of art are banal, unless you are blessed with the imagination and generosity of Richard Williams. Art is conjured up out of nothing. On the other hand, craft has much more to offer than “facility, service and function”. Surely, the best way of healing the fracture is to follow the advice of Michael LaCapra and drop the idea of art altogether.

The most spectacular work of craft-as-art to date is Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God*. Made by a company of jewellers in London’s west end, according to the artist’s instructions, it is a life-size cast of a human skull in platinum, with human teeth, encrusted with 8,601 industrial diamonds. It is a bling *memento mori*, inspired by decorated Aztec skulls. Thousands of people queued to see it, in ticketed groups of ten, when it first went on display, spotlighted in a darkened room, at White Cube Gallery London in June 2007 as part of Hirst’s solo exhibition entitled *Beyond Belief*. Ten weeks later, *For the Love of God* sold for £50 million.

For my present purposes, *For the Love of God* has everything. Besides being craft-as-art, it referred explicitly to an indigenous tradition that was blessedly ignorant of art. The skull, with the invocation of God, brings religious relics to mind. As an artistic gesture it epitomises Hirst’s knowingness, with respect not only to formative influences – Duchamp and Warhol are presiding spirits – but also his grasp of the art market. He was the one, after all, who made £111 million on the day Lehman Brothers went bankrupt, bringing home the 2008 global financial crisis, through a direct sale of his work at Sotheby’s London.

What if *For the Love of God* was a fake, a concoction of paste jewellery? What if it was authentic but those who took the trouble to see it at White Cube – perhaps having travelled around the world – were told on entry to the darkened room that it was a fake? It is very unlikely that their brains would signal the kind of sheer pleasure associated with reward and monetary gain. And, incidentally, it would not be beyond Hirst to pull such a stunt: in 2017 he made an exhibition of fakes at the Pinault Foundation Venice: *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. Between the lines, Hirst is asking how can one “believe” in art? Why do people “believe” in art.

²⁸ Ibid. p.270

²⁹ Ibid. p.273

³⁰ Ibid. p.307

In his book *The God Delusion*, Dawkins sets out his theory of memes, whereby art and other kinds of cultural information, beneficial to the species, are handed down from one generation to another in a non-genetic kind of natural selection as “self-replicating tokens of religious ideas”³¹ And beyond this is psychology, a closer study of the “grey matter” that Duchamp insisted on as the vital factor in any artistic equation. Such a line of enquiry, to an extent followed by Martin Kemp et al, might one day reveal an equivalent of the God Particle, but for now it exists in the realm of known unknowns and we are left preoccupied with this thing called art, as Dawkins is preoccupied with religion.

Art and religion have a lot in common, but a significant difference lies in the degree to which art interrogates itself, and the nature of that interrogation. Art as an institution is auto-analytical to an extraordinary degree and aforementioned artists, from Duchamp to Deller, are amongst countless others whose work capitalises on its openness to question. Modernism was notoriously self-conscious, but what characterises much of the best art today is a thorough-going scepticism with respect to any idea of art being anything other than a phantom conjured up out of faith. It has a no-nonsense attitude, refreshing in the face of an outdated romanticism that was not repudiated but rather reincarnated through modernism. Their various ways of working tend to undermine the foundations that support the edifice of art in a Western sense – and art only *really* is in a Western sense – so that we now find ourselves remarkably free, free to go anywhere with it. We might be listening to a brass band playing acid house (Deller), or watching two people rolling around on a floor slowly kissing each other (Sehgal), looking a pot (Perry) – or a basket – or flies being born and dying around an animal carcass (Hirst), and our art world embraces all such things, co-opts them as art. We could celebrate the fact that art is as absorbent as capitalism – giving us that warm glow in the orbitofrontal cortex – morphing itself to incorporate anything that might be deemed a challenge. Or we might return to *An Oak Tree* and see the co-option of otherwise unremarkable things as the result of a religious impulse, unnecessary if not now a little desperate.

Money and art are inextricably linked, and faith, despite its spiritual overtones, has got a lot to do with it. There is more than a little truth in the joke that the difference between craft and art is the addition of at least two noughts to the price of the latter. There is nothing left, after all the harrowing of art – not least by itself – except belief, and people pay lots of good (and bad) money for it. If William Morris’ dreams came true and capitalism collapsed, and with it the art market, would we care so much about fake Rembrandts? Would we care at all about art? Larry Shiner is somewhat resigned to the persistence of the art myth. Unlike Morris, he concludes that “most people will participate in several kinds of art worlds, moving across the old divisions and hierarchies and juggling more or less successfully the relationships among art, religion, politics, and everyday life”. In other words, “you can’t go home again”³², and art stays put. But is this necessarily the way things will play out?

Religions come and go. Often churches lie abandoned if they are not recycled into recording studios or co-working spaces. Without art, we would still have painting, sculpture, video installation, performance, sound and music, and all forms of creativity, including craft, appreciated without the cultural elitism and mystification that holds sway. Imagine, two hundred years from now, people wandering around the ruins of the Louvre, wondering what all the fuss was about.

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³¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Penguin, London 2006, pp. 232–233

³² Larry Shiner, *Op. cit.*, p.307

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