DEAD CANOES
The Fate of Agency in Twentieth-Century Murik Art

David Lipset

Abstract: In Art and Agency, Alfred Gell seeks to reclaim the anthropology of art for the Durkheimian social. However, in the course of arguing that objects should be viewed as the “outcome, and/or the instrument, of ... agency” (Gell 1998: 15), he takes an essentialized view of the relationship of personhood to embodiment that, on the one hand, preconceives this relationship as consubstantial and, on the other, as static. Nevertheless, viewing art in Gell’s way mimics itself; it offers agency, a powerful exegetical methodology for the study of art. In this article, I apply and refine Gell’s thesis by means of a historical explication of the theme of agency in the art of the Murik Lakes people, a group of Sepik River fisher folk and traders. More broadly, I argue that Gell’s analytical framework in Art and Agency needs to admit that the relationship of art to personhood and modernity is cultural, discursive, and unfinalized, as well as instrumental.

Key words: agency, art, cosmology, Gell, history, Murik Lakes, personhood, Sepik

Art objects, according to Gell, should be viewed as resulting from and/or in possession of human powers that may assert themselves through one form or a combination of several forms. He adopted Peircean terminology (Peirce 1972) to define three dimensions of their efficacy: (1) an object may ‘index’ the magical skill of the artist; (2) an object may ‘index’ its relationship as a living entity to its user; or (3) an object may be an ‘icon’ of a spirit, that is, it may manifest a divine prototype. In each case, the power of the image does not derive from being a metonymic part of that which it represents. Neither does it derive from being a metaphoric substitute. Artistic agency is not caused by a distinct, originary structure of meaning. Its imagery is not symbolic, the representational meanings of which are therefore detached from referents; they are...
rather ‘distributed’ fragments of artists, spirits, or their owners (Gell 1998: 104; see also Appadurai 1986; Jeudy-Ballini and Juillerat 2002). For Gell, art, like the Maussian gift (Mauss 1967), is endowed with embodiment, mind, spirit, memory, agency—in short, with personhood. Objects are, in a word, alive.

In his remarkable book, *Art and Agency* (1998), Gell was retrieving analysis of artistic meaning for the Durkheimian social in the sense that, like Bourdieu before him (1984), he placed analytical priority on the relationship between art and collective formations. He therefore rejected the notion that art may or should be primarily understood in aesthetic terms.¹ Art, moreover, was not a visual code, nor a language nor an alternative language. Instead, Gell advocated a weak kind of methodological individualism (Popper 1966; see also Giddens 1984) through which art was to be seen to result in and from social action. That is, he looked for its meaning not in the properties of specific works, but from the contexts in which actors made them and/or sought to wield them, as well as from the people upon whom both might try to exert influence. But Gell found it difficult, if not impossible, to shake art free of convention. Art remained entangled in an ambiguous relationship to culture. He thus wrote that “artworks are … the outcome of social initiatives which reflect a specific, socially inculcated sensibility” (1998: 220). In other words, the fusion of art in the social remained determined by, or at least a response to, pre-existing, taken-for-granted views about agency, views that presumably must be authorized. Artistic agency, Gell would seem to have conceded, is not autonomous and cannot be analyzed separately from concepts of identity, e.g., from a cultural construction.

Since Gell’s book first appeared, criticism of its thesis has gone in several directions. A collection by Pinney and Thomas (2001), entitled *Beyond Aesthetics*, raised three ethnographically based objections. In brief, these were: (1) symbolics, which is to say, a linguistic, communicational, meaning-based view, may not be omitted from the analysis of art; (2) ethno-aesthetics may contribute to local concepts of art; and (3) in post-colonial contexts, the notion of agency in art may be implicated in wider, nationally based sociopolitical constituencies.² Rejecting Gell’s thesis, Layton (2003) elaborated upon the first two of these criticisms. The anthropology of art, he protested, cannot just construe objects as instrumental and dispense with the notion that art, like language, conveys multiple meanings and messages. The relationship of object to artist, user, or spirit may be indexical and iconic, but art, after all, is not free-form and improvisational, the admission of which, as I say, Gell himself could not escape (see also Gell 1998: 99). An anthropology of art, Layton concluded, must involve itself in a wide-ranging exegetical project that may not privilege the social.

Unlike Layton, I would not throw out the Gell thesis. I agree that viewing art as the instrumentality of distributed persons is a methodologically useful move. However, my point is that the relationship of art to agency is necessarily based in received concepts of self and other. That is, it is tied to concepts of legitimacy and personhood, which must take locally meaningful expression. (Gell, as I observed above, acknowledged this.) Since Fortes’s (1973) piece on crocodile spirits and Tallensi identity appeared, not to mention Anderson’s
ethnology has consistently depicted personhood and its constituent attributes, powers, and processes of reproduction as neither essentialized nor homogeneous, but as situated, constructed, discursive, and polyphonic (Geurts 2002; Herdt 1981; cf. Spiro 1993; Strathern 1988). Methodologically, the anthropology of art may not isolate itself from culturally variable concepts of identity within which the agency that objects exert makes sense. There is, moreover, another dimension of analysis from which the agency in art may not be isolated, namely, its shifting—erasing, impeding, enabling—relationships with modernity. Within and against the hegemony of capitalism, Christianity, and the state, the meanings of a tribal art—the focus of this essay—are dialogically responsive to history. Yet in *Art and Agency*, Gell largely adopts an ahistorical concept of the person. Despite these twin shortcomings, my sense is that Gell’s view of art mimics itself: it bestows analytical agency. In order to show both its merits and deficiencies, I have set myself three inter-related tasks in this essay: (1) to apply and refine Gell’s thesis; (2) to do so through an explication of the theme of agency in the art of the Murik Lakes people, a group of Sepik River fisher folk and traders; and (3) to accomplish this by taking the measure of the transformation of agency in art at the end of the twentieth century.

I begin this tripartite project by fleshing out Gell’s difficult, richly textured argument in more parochial terms than his. I shall reread it not as a Peircean semiotician but as a Pacific hand who has become interested in what I call the dialogics of vernacular and modern forms of agency (Lipset 2004a, 2004b). I do not want to bore non-specialist readers by rehearsing all that Gell had to say about each and every piece of Pacific art that appeared in his book. In order to document the points I want to make about Gell’s view of personhood in objects, I need mention only a few of them.

**The Pacific in *Art and Agency***

The Pacific is a part of the world where, as Gell writes of Melanesia, “aesthetics are about efficacy, the capacity to accomplish tasks, not ‘beauty’” (1998: 94). As an example of this instrumental view of art, Gell cites kula valuables on the island of Gawa in Papua New Guinea (Munn 1986), which were associated with a trader’s personal name and were seen as indexes of his body, mind, and power: “An important arm-shell or necklace does not ‘stand for’ someone important, in a symbolic way; to all intents and purposes it is an important person in that age, influence and something like ‘wisdom’ inheres in its physical substance, in its smooth and patinated surfaces” (Gell 1998: 231). As a system of action, kula exchange constituted a “form of cognition which takes place outside of the body … [and] is diffused in space and time” (ibid.: 232). Likewise, New Ireladers imbued carved malanggan statues with life for a few hours during mortuary rituals when they provided the deceased with a temporary ‘skin’ (Kuchler 1992). Like the kula ornaments, the statues were not conceived of as supernatural in any sense; they were living bodies containing
past relationships as well as a template for future ones. Such objects possessed agency because, culturally speaking, they were persons and not inert art. In Melanesia, art was no less embedded in society than were people—not figuratively, but literally.

In New Zealand, after the settler state defeated the Maori and banned warfare in 1872, Maori chiefs began to build houses competitively. From 1870 to 1930, whole communities started to compete against each other to construct meeting halls (Neich 1996). The buildings became larger and more elaborate during this period. Like the *kula* valuables and the *malanggan* statuary, these halls were not considered symbols (Thomas 1995). They were understood as indexes of collective agency meant to crush the self-esteem of rival communities and exalt the ancestors through a demonstration of superior magnificence and worldliness (which often included references to colonial art and influence). The hall was intended not to represent but rather to objectify the wealth, sophistication, and skill of the builders. It was also thought of as the body of an eponymous ancestor, whom it did not just memorialize but actually “reinstated” (Gell 1998: 253). Its ridge pole was the chiefly lineage, while descending rafters “indicated” cadet lines (ibid.). Its relationship to the past was neither traditional nor innovatory in any absolute sense. It was both an act of mimicry of the past and a memory, just as it also served as a sketch of houses yet unbuilt, a promise for the future. Like *kula* exchange, Gell viewed *malanggan* statues and Maori architecture as endowed with a collective body, mind, and agency.

By contrast, Marquesan tattoos and ornaments were literally attached to the human body and had the overall purpose of “rendering the person powerful and invulnerable” (Gell 1998: 191). The *etua* tattoo, a lizard, did not just stand for a lizard. “It was an *etua*, right there on the body, not because it ‘looked like’ an *etua* somewhere else. The graphic act was a ritual performance which brought into being a productive spirit” (ibid.; emphasis in original). Similarly, ear ornaments, which were plugs inserted into the lobe, embodied a mythic narrative and transmitted it into the mind, “like a Sony Walkman” (ibid.: 211). What was the “essence of Marquesan art” (ibid.: 191)? That the graphic gesture was not symbolic but alive.

In Tahiti, to cite one more example of Pacific art in *Art and Agency*, the *to’o* staffs or pillars were originally created by Oro, the creator spirit, to keep the sky from falling, thereby preserving daylight and the human community. According to Gell, the staffs were both an iconic and aniconic prototype of Oro, who also founded the paramount lineage, control over which rival chiefs fought for status and power. During the decisive ritual (*pa’iattua*), the *to’o* were assembled and unwrapped from their usual tapa coverings, which were then renewed, and the objects were rewrapped. Before doing so, the staffs were revealed to the ranking leaders, who bestowed red feathers upon them. Oro ruled, but his power was held by religious leaders and chiefs via the feathers and the ritual “binding of the primary index of his person, the *to’o*” (Gell 1998: 114).

If I abstract from Gell’s commentaries, certain assumptions upon which his methodology rests become clear. Rejecting the meanings of Pacific art objects as symbolic, he stresses their magico-religious construction as ‘distributed’
persons. But unwittingly, Gell appears to privilege a consubstantial notion of
distribution; in his view, art objects are iconic fragments of distributed bodies,
not metaphors, metonyms, or symbols. Moreover, his concept of ‘person’ is
one instituted prior to the interventions of colonialism, capitalism, Christian-
ity, and so forth. Or, when not, as in the Maori meeting halls, he focuses on
how the distributed power contained in objects was intensified by the arrival
of the state. In doing so, he draws analytical attention to the points of view of
senior men in these examples, e.g., the ranking kula traders and malanggan
leaders, chiefly Maori and chiefly Tahitians, rather than to the concerns of
junior men and all ages of women, whether missionized, educated, or entre-
preneurial—that is, the whole polyphony of societies now in transit. In these
pre-state contexts, from this gerontocratic, androcentric, culturally conservative
perspective, art objects embodied sacred persons and served political purposes
at the local level, art having been a primary source of and cosmic target for
male status competition in this part of the world. As I shall go on to argue, this
is necessary background but not a sufficient story. I turn now to a historical
exegesis of personhood in the art of the Murik Lakes people in order to expli-
cate the relationship of Gell’s thesis to its particular cultural logic, as well as to
its rather more prevalent response to modernity.

The Agency of Murik Spirits

In certain circles, Murik art is well known. Art historians have discussed some
of the elements of its corpus (Beier and Aris 1975; Fraser 1962). Having been
heavily and thoroughly collected for over 100 years, it has decorated jackets of
books written by Melanesian anthropologists (see Hogbin 1970; Lawrence and
Meggitt 1965). Epitomizing as it does an art style that is associated with the
Lower Sepik-Ramu region, Murik art has been repeatedly displayed in museum
installations and documented in numerous catalogues (Kelm 1966; Wardwell
1971). It is readily available for purchase in tribal art shops here, there, and
now through the Internet. How the agency with which it used to be credited
was culturally understood has nevertheless gone—and has continued to go—
completely unattended (see, e.g., Smidt and Eoe 1999: 110–111).

Murik communities are built upon the seashores that divide a large system
of brackish lagoons just to the west of the mouth of the Sepik River from the
Pacific Ocean: the people manipulate a world of water. They transport them-
selves about the Murik Lakes and on the ocean in anthropomorphic vessels
they call ‘canoes’ (gai’itin) in order to fish and travel (see figure 1). Likewise,
they believed, and continue to believe, that the spirits (nabran) of culture
heroes and heroines moved about the region in these canoes. These ances-
tors were legendary male spirits (brag or pot nor) and female spirits (sambam
merogo or pot merogo). But the relationship of these spirits to their canoes was
not exactly iconic or indexical in the consubstantial sense that Gell’s examples
of the Gawan kula valuables, the New Ireland malanggan, the Maori meeting
house, the Marquesan tattoos, or the Tahitian to’o staff all seem to have been.
FIGURE 1  Human Spirits Traveling in a Canoe

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1988
The masks of the Murik *brag* spirits were largely unadorned, except for a single zoomorphic image, which might appear carved in some degree of dimensionality on the middle of their long foreheads (see figure 2). If the mask was considered ‘to be’ the ‘face’ of the spirit (*brag sebug*), the forehead images were said ‘to be’ a second manifestation of his body. Each image took one of several forms, such as a trevally fish, different birds, the monitor lizard, or a snake, among others. The forehead figures were also said to be ‘canoes’ of the spirit depicted by the mask. The relationship between the spirit and the

**FIGURE 2** The *brag* Mask, Sendam

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1982
zoomorphic image was and was not iconic, in Gell’s sense of the image objectifying a fragment of a distributed body. What was the status of the forehead image itself? Was it literally the canoe of the spirit or a carved image of the canoe of the spirit? On the one hand, it was distinguished from its spirit, that is, it was a vehicle for, rather than an embodiment of, a brag. On the other hand, it was indeed identified as the latter, of which identification I will have more to add below. Suffice it to say that today, Murik men tend to elide the distinction. What was more important to them was how the spirit’s canoe provided it with the same agency afforded to and exerted by human beings in the cosmic canoes that the men built and both men and women use in daily travels: the canoe, a monitor lizard in this case, transported Sendam, the brag spirit, through nature and society in the same way that a canoe would transport people through water (see Lipset 1997: 192–194).

One aspect of the identity between the monitor lizard ‘canoe’ and the Sendam mask shown in figure 2 was therefore vehicular—not only was it transportational, it was also enterable and exitable. It was not just an indivisible, consubstantial re-instatement or objectification of the male spirit. The canoe embodied him, thereby endowing him with the ability to move, to circulate. But the spirit also possessed the power to change from one canoe to another, from one body to another. This endowed the spirit with a specific sort of agency by means of a culturally specific concept of the person. The body in this concept is distinctive because it is not the decisive image: the body is a canoe.

If both spirits and people may move about the region in canoes, they were also afforded a second kind of agency by these vehicles: the ability to communicate. When traveling in the Murik Lakes or elsewhere in the Lower Sepik, the zoomorphic canoe of a spirit might appear and convey a warning or a message of support to one of its kin. The canoe of the brag spirit called Mwarinor is a shark (see figure 3). If a member of the kin group of this spirit traveled in his canoe—for example, to meet a horticultural trading partner elsewhere in the lake—and a shark appeared along the way, he or she might attend to what direction the ‘shark’s wake’ (kaango arumdang) was going. If it crossed the canoe, he or she might infer that it would be better to turn around and head back home, because either some kind of danger lurked ahead or the trading partner was simply unprepared for their meeting (cf. Newton 1987). By contrast, should the shark or his wake follow his canoe, or should the canoe follow in the boat’s wake, then the traveler might conclude that his or her way was safe and that the trading partner was prepared for their exchange.

Nabran, the Murik word for spirit, also means ‘spider’, and a decorative motif that bears its name (nabranarogo sigian) appears on many objects. Now, notably, the spider image also seems to refer to artistic agency. As Peter Aris, a Murik carver, told Ulli Beier in 1975: “The spider is the perfect designer. The fine, precise lines of its web and the intricacy of the design it produces … the carver himself is aiming at” (Beier and Aris 1975: 17). In other words, while the spider presented its creation as a model for artistic agency, it was not exactly an image of agency itself. Spiders, the Murik also remark, spin webs in the interstices of human dwellings, attaching their symmetrical designs to
spaces where its pieces are tethered together. Similarly, human life was once thought to depend on the tethering of the nabran spirit to the body—by the act of tying string about the forehead (Barlow 1985; see also Kuchler 2003). The spider’s web, according to this image, was a kind of epiphenomenon—a commentary upon life, not its source. What is more, the most distinctive agency of a spirit is understood as its menung, that is, its tongue (in the Murik vernacular), its language. In the past, spirits would ‘stand up’ (o’dekara), shake men, and talk through their mouths. Living persons stand, and attendants yell at their kin to do so when they lie ill and lose consciousness. Movement, speech, design, and the ability to stand up, that is, to act independently in society, are
all attributes of living persons, a classification that used to include spirits and their canoes, wooden masks and figurines, animals and kin. In turn, personhood was viewed as contingent upon sustaining a relationship between the spider spirit and its canoes.

The kin of a brag mask, such as Mwariinor, regarded him as an ancestor and his shark canoe as one, too. They were therefore meant to observe a dietary restriction forbidding them from ‘eating his canoe’. This taboo suggests that there was a consubstantial relationship between canoe and spirit—that the shark canoe embodied the brag Mwariinor and therefore may not be eaten. The shark, the mask, and kinsmen shared a common spider spirit. They were, as the Murik say, each different ‘canoes’ for Mwariinor’s spirit; that is, people acknowledge that they were different vehicles for the one spirit that united them. I allow that this rendering of Murik animism may distort the relationship of canoes to spirits as it was understood in the pre-state, pre-missionized era. Possibly no such distinction was made in those days, and the canoe idea was a way of expressing how one body, taking multiple forms, was indivisibly connected to the spider spirit. But at least in the latter twentieth century, the spider spirit was simultaneously differentiated from and identified with its distributed bodies, as Gell might have put it, by means of the canoe image, and this relationship is what I want to call ethno-semiotic (cf. Toderov 1982: 15–59). It is not a Western but rather a vernacular construction of a relationship between sign and referent.

The Death of the Masks

I have deliberately phrased this ethno-semiotic construction of body, agency, and person in the past tense. Like the low, low tides of the globally warmed Pacific, it has been ebbing away over time, perhaps today with increasing pace. The individuated contours of identity flow readily and steadily into the community via the usual institutions, as well as being contained within store-bought commodities and during markets, big and small (LiPuma 2001). For the moment, however, the meanings of Murik art persist amid a dialogized world of vernacular and modern ideas that are immanent in dugout canoes, fiberglass and metal dinghies, carved wooden paddles, and outboard motors, not to mention Tok Pisin, the Murik language, the state of Papua New Guinea, the male and female cults, and the Seventh-day Adventist Mission.

This mix is nothing new. Twenty years earlier, when I was first allowed into the old Numarum male cult hall in Darapap village, large brag masks lined its side rear walls (see figure 4). Until about the mid-1960s or so, these masks had been ‘alive’ and had been looked after in the houses of their ‘owners’ (see figure 5). Up till then, the spider spirits (nabran) possessed both masks and men, affording them the kinds of transportational and tutelary agency I have been discussing. By 1981, the masks were “just empty,” a senior man named Kangai complained to me. All they did now was lie about “like empty clam shells.” The masks had been removed for storage in the male cult hall, he went on to
**Figure 4**  *Brug* Masks Lining the Side Wall of the Numarum Male Cult Hall in Darapap

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1982
David Lipset

tell me, because their guardians had stopped abiding by the dietary taboos associated with their canoes. They moved the masks out of their houses to try to avoid the magico-religious consequences of their ritual negligence, that is, the power of their spirits’ sorcery spells (nabran timiit). The masks, Kangai continued, had been killed by the missionization that had been going on in Darapap throughout the twentieth century, administered at first by the Catholic Church and then taken over at mid-century by Seventh-day Adventists.

In 2001, however, the brag masks were no longer kept in the male cult hall. Their ‘owners’ had returned them to their respective houses for safekeeping after a young man had allegedly sold one of them to an Australian buyer. He was said not to have received permission from anyone in his family to do so, and was then faulted for failing to distribute to anyone’s satisfaction the money he had received.

**Figure 5** A Decorated Brag Mask in the Doorway of a House

Photograph by L. Pierre Ledoux, 1936
from the sale. In pre-colonial times, as now, the ‘owner’ of a mask was a group of matrikin headed by its senior sibling group, rather than any single individual. Evidently, this collective concept of ownership, as well as the cosmological agency of these masks, that is, their ability to punish their kin for ritual negligence, had given way to a market-based concept of ownership and profiteering—at least enough so that such larceny could be conceived and enacted. Notably, the profit from the sale was said to have been divided up among kin—although inequitably—and not simply absconded with. My point here is that while knowledge of and belief in Murik religion had ebbed and had become differentiated across the generations in 2001, it had not entirely disappeared.

Carving Masks, Living and Dead

Some of the masks that were kept in the male cult hall in 1981 had been made during pre-colonial times (i.e., prior to World War I, more or less), when Murik men used stone and shell adzes and their carving was enabled by cosmic masculinity. In those days, learning to carve took the form of a male initiation rite. Young men were endowed with a sacramental agency that separated them from the erotic allure of fertile young women and from the debilitating contamination that resulted from intimacies with the women’s impure bodies. The apprenticeship that then followed was a lengthy trial-and-error process that began with the observation of the work and the adoption of what Murik men call the ‘style’ (dariin, literally, ‘the hand’) of his father or another senior carver.

The process of endowing a mask or a figurine with agency required that the carver continuously mutter secret spells (timiit) to himself as he worked and that he adhere to sexual, dietary, and spatial taboos that sequestered or segregated him from young women. These rules had several causes and effects. One of them was that since the carver’s hand had become a ‘canoe’ for the spirit whose image was being created, so that the spirit in question would guide his hand to do well, the artist had to preserve the purity of his canoe-body. The relationship of the carver’s body to the spirit for whom he was working was another factor: “When carving a [mask], the artist leaves the eyes and the mouth until last. The moment when he carves these openings is the moment when he bestows life on the image. As he paints the eyes with weikur (a clay that ranges from brown through terracotta to pink) he paints around his own eyes with the same color” (Beier and Aris 1975: 22). Clearly, the two had a special connection, a connection, as Gell might say, that was indexical. Both man and spirit joined together to cause the mask to come into being. In each family, I should add, there was only one master carver who was ritually empowered to create living masks and sculptures. Therefore, at any one time, just a handful of men in the whole community had been selected by and had undergone the ritual apprenticeship with the previous generation. There were only a few ‘canoes’ who had the right, the training, and the agency to create living images for the spirits.

Today, the joint influences of Christianity and the market have democratized and secularized privilege, skill, and outcome. While carving is still
limited to men, any and every man may carve, should he wish to do so. His agency is shaped only by ability and by training gained largely through the observation of elders. Carvers’ hands are no longer understood to become ‘canoes’ for the spirits to steer their creative process. Murik men have become artists, to invoke Collingwood’s (1933) old distinction between art and craft, according to which the former is unpredictable while the outcome of the latter is precisely so. However, it is of interest that the motifs and stylistics of contemporary Murik carving not only have remained recognizable, but have become, partly because of the use of metal tools, more precisely executed than they were earlier in the century.

Composition has changed. Masks and statues carved for commercial purposes have become more ornate in two ways. First, the carvers engrave design motifs, such as dogs’ teeth headbands, loincloths, shell vests, and rings, accessories with which they used to decorate objects when they brought them out ceremonially. Secondly, they deliberately combine ‘canoe’ motifs that formerly did not appear together on any mask, particularly in objects to which they possess hereditary rights. They employ this latter device so as not to create a ‘canoe’ for a spirit, a living mask being unsafe to the health of kin who neglect to adhere to its dietary restrictions and so forth. For example, having studied Murik iconography with several senior carvers, I think I can say that the mask pictured in figure 6 has been adorned with a bat’s face (naboag sebug), hanging upside down, just below the little mouth, and that this is a new combination. The two raised semi-circles below the eyes likely mimic some kind of shell design (kiig sigian). The eyes have been accented with plastic rings. The chin and upper forehead have both been decorated with butterfly designs, to which the artist has also added nautilus shell designs (karian). A fish motif appears in the center of the forehead just above the eyes, the tail of which links to the bridge of the nose of a duplicate spirit face. This duplication is consistent with the idea that the fish canoe may carry the mask’s spirit, but by referring to itself instead of to the fish, the duplicate simultaneously removes the mask from any sort of identity with the real and becomes artificial, plagiarizing pre-state modes of reality instead of reinstating them. I cannot make out what image, if any, is being engraved on the forehead of the mask double.

While Gell argued that magico-religious agency arose in part from artistic skill, from the point of view of senior Murik men and women, there is no agency in this mask. It is not the face of a specific nabran spirit; it is merely the creation of an individual artist. In light of the Baudrillardian sequence (see Baudrillard 1981), in which capitalism dissolves ‘the real’ by stage, leaving behind a desert of signification—repetitive, precise, yet empty—one is tempted to dismiss this mask as nothing more than a counterfeit, a dead commodity. But of course, this would be in error. It would ignore the new dialogics of personhood that is contained within it. I will return to this issue, the blending of Murik imagery and stylistics with the individuated agency behind commercial art, below. Before doing so, I want sketch another dimension of the agency and embodiment of Murik spirits, their now muted shamanic voices.
Figure 6  A Tourist Mask

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1982
The Canoes Silenced

In addition to guiding carvers, the brag spirits used to protect traders as they traveled. They also provided military agency to warriors. Masks were brought to the male cult hall, where they were decorated and ‘fed’ tobacco and a ceremonial porridge (aragen) just before the men went off in their canoes on a war party. One of the spirits might then possess a senior man as his ‘canoe’. Speaking in the voice of the spirit, he would anticipate the impending battle, discussing possible tactics, predicting the outcome, and so forth. Possessed by spirits before they fought, the warriors shouted out the spirits’ names as spearing cries upon killing an enemy. After a successful raid, a celebration might ensue back home. Masks were attached to conical scaffoldings and decorated with dogs’ teeth headbands and shell ornament vests, as well as a leafy bunting. A masker would position himself inside the scaffolding so that it rested on his shoulders; the scaffolding was also called a ‘spirit canoe’ (brag gai’in). The structure of the mask—in other words, its ‘body’—was also a ‘canoe’ (see figure 7). The spirit of the mask might possess the masker during the celebration and shake him like a leaf fluttering in the wind (see Schmidt 1922–1923: 23). The masker then became his canoe-body. In the ritually charged state, such a man was also understood to have to obey sexual taboos that prohibited him from contact with fertile young women. Part of the skeleton of the masker himself was called a ‘canoe’: the rib cage was and still is referred to as a ‘canoe’ in the Murik vernacular, and the term continues to be used to refer to the body as a whole. During this victory celebration, the masker’s canoe-body was no longer just a canoe-body for his own spirit. During this moment, his canoe-body bore the scaffolding, the canoe-body, for his brag’s mask, which was said to be simultaneously the canoe-body for the face of its spirit. The colonial administration ‘pacified’ the Sepik estuary during the years just prior to World War I. In 2001, this intricate, redundant vehicular construction of cosmic male embodiment was no longer practiced in support of male military power. But it did remain in a vestigial way, appearing irregularly to empower the ongoing trade in art and the dance in which Murik men and women continue to engage and specialize throughout the Lower Sepik-Ramu and North Coast region (Lipset 1985; Lipset and Barlow 1987; see also figure 10).

However, another dimension of this vehicular construction of spirit, agency, and personhood has ended. A shaman was called a ‘canoe’, and the shamanic possession-state was construed “as if one is setting out in a canoe; one has to get into it. And so the deity [spirit] ‘gets into’ the gai’in—to tell about the future events and exploits” (Tamoane 1977: 176). Notice the conditional, experientially distant language of analogy used in this quote: becoming possessed by a spirit is said to be only “as if” one is getting into a canoe. In pre-state times, the canoe-body relationship was no analogy, and Gell is quite helpful in appreciating this point. The canoe-body was not an ‘as if’ image. It was not ‘like a canoe’—it was a canoe. The author, Matthew Tamoane, having been raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, went on to attend a national high
FIGURE 7 Canoe Scaffolding for a Brug Mask

Photograph by L. Pierre Ledoux, 1936
school and later took a degree in linguistics at the University of Papua New Guinea during the late 1970s. His generation of modern, missionized youth, having rejected the canoe religion of their elders in favor of Christianity, still wanted to respect the people who raised them.

Tamoane’s analogy, likening shamanic possession to canoe travel, is excerpted from an elegiac essay he contributed to an anthology on prophets in Melanesia (Trompf 1977). His piece concerned Jari, the spirit-woman, who selected Kamoai, one of Tamoane’s grandmothers, to serve as her ‘canoe’ in 1931. There were several gai’in practicing in Darapap village in those days, offering cooperative or supplemental oracular information to cure or divine sorcery or, as I say, to forecast the outcome of collective enterprises, such as warfare, fishing, or hunting. A highlight of Kamoai’s career as a shaman was her prediction of the Allied bombing raid on Darapap in 1944; as a result of her prediction, at least some of the villagers fled in advance of it. Upon her death in 1964, however, the spirit of Jari chose no one to succeed Kamoai as ‘her’ canoe. So today, “prayers are uttered to [her] … with no certainty as to the outcome of requests. What will happen? Will a new gai’in arise? Papua New Guinea is changing” (Tamoane 1977: 211). The nostalgic tone in Tamoane’s voice for the lost referential is clearly audible. The tutelary relationship involved in the human canoe-body, that is, between persons and the voices of the spirits, had been silenced. No longer an index of their agency, the canoe had become a mere analogy.

A Lagoon Canoe Prow

Formerly, the Murik construction of agency in art and society emphasized a relationship between spirit and body that was at once enterable and exitable, as well as consubstantial. This relationship was understood as that between passenger and canoe ferrying both spirits and persons through the environment. It is therefore appropriate, before I conclude, to discuss some salient features of the template of this image of embodiment, namely, Murik canoes themselves. Of the main varieties—ocean-going outriggers (see Barlow and Lipset 1997) and lagoon canoes—I focus here on the prows of the latter vessels, of which there are two styles. One is called the ‘Fog Man’ nose (Wau Nor da’ur), while the other is called the ‘lizard’ (jagreb). The first, to which I now turn, remains the most common prow that is still carved today.

With head imagery being so prominent, the prows of the lagoon canoes (gai’kev) appear to be that part of its body. The body was a canoe, but, vice versa, the canoe was also a body. A highly condensed identity is instantly visible in its convoluted, recursive imagery. A statement about body-spirit-vehicle relations is made here, of which the most obvious, yet perhaps most elusive, point is that, like people, canoes themselves possess multiple canoe-bodies; that is, like people, they possess the property of self-similarity. They are made up of an aggregate of relationships that are not layered, like an onion, or hierarchical, like a series of turtles, or imbricated, like roof shingles, but rather saturated, like a Bakhtinian dialogue, with meaning (see figure 8).
FIGURE 8 The Wau Nor Prow

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1982
At the upper front of this prow, which is the edge of the threshold between canoe and nature, an image appears called the ‘serpent head’ (*uwakun kombatok*). The serpent’s head motif is frequently found engraved atop the heads of male spirit figurines (*kandimboang*) that appear engraved on the handles of numerous objects with which people work, e.g., paddles, hand drums, canoe baiers, slit-drums, flute-stoppers, and headrests. The wide-open ‘eyes’ (*nabiiin*) of the serpent spirit gaze forward into enemy waters. In Murik culture, wide-open eyes are understood to reveal desire, hunger, greed, and intention, but also power (cf. Foucault 1995; Mulvey 1985). The bridge of the serpent’s nose is extended up the forehead to become the ‘beak’ or ‘nose’ of a ‘bird’ (*sarain da’ur*). The eyes of the bird, engraved on the beak, are open and also seem to be staring forward. The bird’s body is cut out in three dimensions, a visible and realist image. Circular and geometric motifs decorate it. The tail feathers of the bird (*wasau kaik*) protrude onto the forehead of the intricate image of a male spirit, one of the ‘Fog Men’ (*Wau Nor*), an upriver water spirit (see Lipset 1997: 137–139). The head and face of this spirit are positioned just inside the front-most edge of the interior of the hull. Unlike the outward-facing, wide-open eyes of the serpent spirit, the eyes of the male spirit seem to be half shut; looking directly into his gaze is believed to cause madness in mortal man. The spirit has been given a fantastically long, thick nose (*Wau Nor da’ur*) that hooks beneath itself. This generous proboscis is actually used to anchor the canoe to shore. The ‘Fog Man’ nose is also called a ‘long bird beak’ (*da’ur arongo*).

The exterior serpent face and the interior ‘Fog Man’ face are doubles. Except for the exaggerated dimensions of the interior one’s skull and nose, they are decorated with the identical ‘designs’ (*sigian*). Both have bird motifs integrated into their foreheads and identical ‘eyebrow ridges’ (*nabiiin mindaak*). The bird design also appears on both exterior sides of the prow (see figure 8). A bird image, which looks as if the realistic figure above it had not been split in half but duplicated, is engraved on its upper section (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1967: 239–263). The eyes of the bird are again open and pointed out toward the water from the sides of the canoe. The heads have also been fixed facedown. Their ‘mouths’ (*sikiin*) gape open.

Just beneath the main design feature of the exterior prow—that is, the two birds—the motif that clearly dominates is a big, open ‘mouth’ bearing a broad set of ‘shark’s teeth’ (*kaangoasarap*) (see figure 9). A serrated ‘dogs’ teeth’ motif (*tarer*) and what is possibly a ‘spider’ design (*nabranarogo*) are wedged in and about the ‘lips’ of the shark (*sikiin bag*). The teeth almost meet at the end of the prow and are sometimes said to be the teeth and mouth of an abstract crocodile (*dwama’iin*), whose eyes are represented by the circular motifs in the spider design and on the belly of the bird on the upper section of the prow.

Children will simply call this labyrinthine image a ‘canoe prow’ (*gai’kev*). Young men and women of all ages and conviction may distinguish the two types of prow design, the ‘Fog Man’ and the ‘lizard’, by name. Carvers and interested onlookers will name each of the decorative motifs and images that appear on the prow. But people rarely, if ever, offer any kind of narrative to
explain either the motifs or the involved faces they depict. They do not derive specific iconographic features of the prow from particular episodes of the ‘Fog Men’ epic, nor do they relate the bird images to flute-origin myths, for example (see Forge 1973). Nor do they offer much by way of commentary in any other expository way about the meaning of the prows.

At this vulnerable threshold, where the canoe-body meets nature, the agencies of war and human spirits combine to pursue joint intentions. Zoomorphic motifs are bound together with humanoid ones in Escher-like figure-ground reversals. Body and spirit are interwoven rather than distinct. Bird tails become huge noses on spirit faces. Mouths gape open, as if to consume the once hostile water space through which the canoe travels. The prow is composed of interwoven canoe-bodies. It does not depict a stable world, but one that is emphatically oriented toward a condition, like birth and death, of being unfinished. It is, as a whole, an image of indeterminacy rather than completeness. It is not an image of a closed body, but one that is passing through a world of passage-ways, thresholds, boundary crossings, and metamorphoses (see also Gennep 1960). Its abundant imagery is at once concrete and sensible, yet extraordinary. The body is depicted as transgressing its limits, gazing at and devouring the world. The nose becomes a beak and a phallus. The gaping maw and wide-open eyes are of a body that “swallows and generates, gives and takes … Such a body … is never clearly differentiated from the world, but is transferred,
merged and fused with it” (Bakhtin 1984: 339). This is Bakhtin’s grotesque body, wherein exaggeration reaches fantastic proportions. The grotesque body is a body imbued with cosmic agency. It can merge with nature; nature can be assimilated into it. The agency depicted in the prow face of this body ignores the closed, impenetrable surface of the domestic body. It is a body in the act of becoming rather than one that is completed and separate in its boundedness.

Art and Agency amid Murik Modernity

Like Mauss (1967) before him, Gell created a theory of objects and personhood. He has surely framed it in a Maussian concept not exactly of the gift, but in the selfsame notion that the self may be instituted in cultural representations as a part of, rather than separate from, the other (see Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986). I want to illustrate the notion of identity that I think Gell meant to evoke by citing one last object that he adduces in Art and Agency, namely, the well-known nineteenth-century Polynesian carving called A’a or Tangeroa from the island of Rurutu (1998: 137–141). The piece is a sculpture of a humanoid spirit on which little versions of the same spirit are repeated all over the body of the object. The spirit, in other words, seems to be sprouting little spirits. Like the image of the leviathan in the frontispiece of Hobbes’s (1951) classic essay on sovereignty and governance, the A’a is also a hollow box that contains twenty-four small duplicate replicas of itself inside itself. But instead of representing individual citizens, each of the latter may have corresponded to one of the clans in Rurutu society (cf. Gell 1998: 137n4). The A’a figure, in other words, is a single image that consists of itself and a number of images of itself. It is an image of collective identity made up of “an aggregate of … relations (the outcome of genealogy)” (ibid.: 139). It depicts the person as a fractal assemblage of spirits (Wagner 1991) that makes the plural singular and the singular plural, nullifying the difference between inner and outer. This A’a sculpture, I suggest, exemplifies a logic of an ego composed of the many that appears often in Pacific societies, as Marilyn Strathern (1988) has also argued. However, by privileging a concept of the person in which the body may not be mediated by any symbolics, and must thus be composed of miniature versions of itself, Gell’s thesis requires a little bit of revision.

Embodiment as a mode of classification, much less as a basis for subjectivity, cannot be essentialized. Such a declaration should hardly raise an eyebrow, especially after the many years that have elapsed since the publication of The Savage Mind (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 1–33). From a cross-cultural standpoint, why should embodiment be viewed as any less diverse than the art through which it is manifest? Constructed in distinctive terms, I have shown that Murik embodiment informed meanings of agency in Murik art. However, in order to comprehend either embodiment or agency in Murik culture, relying on a theory of art in which a concept of the relationship between object and personhood is taken to be self-evident will not do. The construction of spirit (i.e., agency) in Murik art exposes the limits of Gell’s concept of person and embodiment.
Being understood as indexical, but not exactly iconic, at least in Gell’s consubstantial sense, person and body were explicitly conceptualized in an ethnosemiotic relationship. The object or motif was a canoe-body for its referent, a spirit, as well as for a co-ordinate group of kin (who themselves constituted yet another canoe-body) and for the spirit of its human creator, the artist. But as I insist, the magico-religious agency of the one was not iconically—that is, it was not indivisibly—distributed in the other. Its distribution was modeled after the relationship of a passenger to a boat, as this relationship had already been constructed in Murik culture.

“If there is an emphasized meaning in the phrase ‘worldview’ … it is in the suggestion it carries of the structure of things as man is aware of them” (Redfield 1953: 86). In addition to the use of the ‘canoe’ image in the contexts of the relationship between the spirits and their various bodies, cosmic and human, entailments of it oriented the meanings of many other Murik artifacts. For example, slit-drums—which were given personal names, were understood to be possessed by spirits, and were used to communicate with kin—are said to have ‘prows’ (*kev*), which are their handles. The handles of canoe paddles, hand drums, bowls, plates, flute-stoppers, and headrests are all called ‘prows’ as well. Like the canoes, all of these ‘prow’ handles were decorated by images of male spirits (see figures 10 and 11). Moreover, not only were these objects evidently ‘canoes’ empowered by spirits, so social groups are referred to as ‘canoes’ with the associated agency of human spirits. Five siblings are sometimes termed a ‘canoe’ by parents, and a first-born is sometimes called his father’s ‘canoe-prow son’ (*ga’kev goan*). Officeholders are called ‘canoes’ for the insignia of the descent groups they are said ‘to steer’. The platform on which a retiring officeholder is seated together with other kinswomen and kinsmen is built and decorated to resemble a canoe (see Lipset 1997: 128). The lead dancer in a dance troupe entering a performance is called its ‘canoe prow’.

**Figure 10** A Bowl with Bat Spirit Motifs Inscribed on Its Prow Handle

Photograph by B. Davis, 2004
And the resident whose house is located at the tip of the small peninsula in Darapap village that is most exposed to the sea is also called the ‘canoe prow’ of the community.

But modernity has been stripping this Redfieldian world-view of its material-cosmological bases and of the tacit, cultural sense it once made. And this is the basis of my second point of disagreement with Gell: his view of the relationship of agency to its cultural objectifications in art is far too ahistorical. In Murik, substitutions have been steadily occurring in the material culture. Ceramic and metal dishes and pots and pans have replaced wooden plates and clay pottery. Pillows long ago replaced headrests. fiberglass boats have recently replaced outrigger canoes. An animistic material culture—which consisted, in Murik terms, of canoe-bodies of the spider spirits—has been superceded by lifeless commodities.

The pre-state notion of embodiment, so thoroughly gendered and eminently enterable and exitable as it was imagined, is being replaced by different categories of subjectivity and personhood. Masks no longer possess men for tutelary purposes. Men no longer go to war as brag spirits. People consult aid-post

**FIGURE 11** A Canoe Handle Decorated with a *Kandimboang* Spirit

Photograph by D. Lipset, 1986
orderlies instead of canoe-shamans. They go to hospitals where officials speak in only their own voices. In addition to observing dietary taboos, a man acting to secure the agency of a spirit in the contexts of carving, shamanism, warfare, and masked performances had to avoid engaging in heterosexual lovemaking—that is, he had to separate himself from young women. Today, under the influences of the missions and the state, men rarely bother with the demands imposed by this sacralized construction of agency. Today, body and spirit are little understood in a vehicular relationship. Material culture used to be part of a larger Bakhtinian dialogics of male and female, as I argued in Mangrove Man (see Lipset 1997), in which masculine institutions could be understood as responses and rejoinders to a spectral presence in Murik culture of a set of contradictory values, capacities, and qualities that were exemplified by young mothers (see also Barlow and Lipset 1997). Today, although men, and only men, go on carving, their art is no longer analytically or culturally comprehensible as a male answer to the sexual and reproductive powers of womanhood as much as it is a response to the market. No longer ritually trained to be chaste canoe-bodies for the spirits, carvers simply produce ‘hyper-real’ simulacra of canoe-bodies, which they purposely falsify, to sell as ‘art’.

Yet Murik art flourishes. Many more men, their numbers no longer restricted by the social structure, carve. While their composition has become freer, more voluntaristic, their art nevertheless remains distinctively Murik in appearance, retaining a characteristic wholeness. Most details in this system of imagery remain awash in one consistent unity of style. And this persistent relationship of invention to convention raises Gell’s questions anew. Which concepts of personhood, agency, and embodiment are immanent in commercial Murik art? Or, in my terms, in the aftermath of the death of the spirits, what dialogics with modernity may be said to be contained within it? Art remains indexical, but it has become disconnected, detached, and removed from cosmic masculinity. It is an index of the individual artist’s training, skill, and imagination. It is no longer an objectification of the spirits.

The little figurine (kandimboang) commonly associated with Murik tourist art is instructive. These pieces continue to appear on the handles of lagoon canoe paddles, as if to protect and assist the efforts of the traveler. Outside of the Murik Lakes, I can think of no rarer piece than a Murik paddle. One never sees it in museum collections, or installations, or for sale. By contrast, the little figurine is ubiquitous. In the past, the kandimboang figure may have been a canoe-body of a spirit. Today, this image has literally been detached from its masculine-cosmic purposes (see figure 12). It is now made for a different reason. It is made to sell. Here, the separation of the icon from ‘his’ handle, that is, from his performed role of human support, reflects the transformation and fate of agency in twentieth-century Murik art—its transformation from a distributed cosmic body, as a male canoe for a spider spirit, to an art object created by and through the agency of an individual carver for the benefit of himself and his kin, albeit one as yet without authorial signature.

In other words, the map has come to illustrate a different view of the territory. Murik art has become a model; its creators no longer try to make it coincide
with the real. But the real has not quite disappeared. In this era of simulation, signs of the real do persist on lagoon canoe prows, the handles of paddles, and drums. But these dim referentials to what was formerly real are just shattered remains of the day when the distributed agency of spirits exerted themselves through their canoe-bodies, large and small, and had not yet been displaced by modern concepts of personhood and things. Contemporary art, both in use and to sell, does not threaten the difference between the real and the imaginary. Its imagery, which continues to resemble itself, does not refer to itself as much as it does to a past, to history, to a cosmology that is almost disintegrated. Art no longer lends credence to the reality of the society’s dependency upon occult masculine (and feminine) agency. Art is no longer part of a strategy and an
effort by men to re-insert the real and the referential everywhere and thereby persuade people of the reality of the relationship between the male, the cosmic, and the social. Collective male power no longer produces signs denying its internal marginality; rather, like a cash crop, individual men produce signs of the external dependency and marginality of Murik society upon exchange value. Murik art has become a sign of a lost but not yet non-existent referential. Still, commercial carving remains a site of a disappearance of meaning rather than of its creation. It is a flawless simulation of the embodiments of dead spirits. By their individuated agency, and through their voluntaristic combinations of motifs (birds, bats, serpents’ heads, beak noses, decorative designs), Murik artists actively reference the canoe cosmology that continues to be distributed across their work like an increasingly foreign vocabulary.

The relationship of Murik art to the visions of modernity to which the culture has been, and continues to be, subjected is contradictory: it is individuating yet still largely antiquarian (cf. Silverman 1999). Murik art remains imbued with agency, to be sure. But the overall concept of the person within which that agency is embedded has changed. No longer are cosmic (i.e., collective) male spirits distributed in canoe-bodies. Murik art has become a separate, distinctive creation that continues to draw upon a culturally persistent repertoire of motifs and a unity of style. New boundaries and a new form of agency inform the relationship of artist to culture. Murik art expresses the ongoing transformation of signs that once objectified something—namely, male and female agency, constituted by Murik cosmology and social structure—to signs that objectify nothing but that which has been lost, and, of course, to individuated agency motivated by making money to fulfill the needs of kin.

How can this story of dead canoe-bodies, denuded of agency, fail to call to mind Weber’s *Entzauberung* (Eisenstadt 1968: liv; see also Gell 1992)? That rationality in its substantive rather than its organizational form inevitably causes *Entzauberung* saddened Max Weber. Disenchancing, demystifying, and attenuating formerly magical or charismatic forms of agency, rationality in his view displaced them with instrumental thought, with science, with routinization in various domains, and with mere technique (Weber 1958a; see also Weber 1958b). I would put his well-worn lament somewhat differently, drawing again upon Gell’s Peircean terms. Shifting world-views from the magical to the rational goes on for an interminable period, rather than a definite interval, in which imbalances between self and other persist, without erasing either one. In this case, the balance between the iconic and the symbolic tilts in favor of the latter (e.g., the self may be but is not substantially located in the body or the object). The iconic identity of person, agency, and object is broken in two. The art object stands for the self, but neither it nor the artist is fitted with collective and sacralized agency. The meaning of Murik art, which was formerly both iconic and symbolic, has become reduced or simplified as merely representational. But modernity, as mediated through Murik culture, does not entirely disenchant the world; it does not entirely eliminate the iconic relationship between the agencies of self and spirit that used to become manifest in multiple canoe-bodies. The
spirits, as an explanation of illness and misfortune, abide (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

The anthropology of art, Gell argued, should be founded in a specific Maussian script, in which qualities of the person are not distributed symbolically in objects but rather consubstantially. In other words, the agency of the self is part of the other, whether that other is construed materially or socially. This framework remains, in my view, a useful way to orient a historical exegesis of the agency in Murik art. However, I have shown that Gell’s vision needs to be amended and refined in two related ways. It must admit that person concepts, which afford meaning to objects, are culturally constructed. In this instance, the person is constructed through ethno-semiosis. And secondly, it must also acknowledge that concepts of personhood, and therefore the meanings of art objects, may undergo severe change. In Murik, both have become more individuated and detached from the collective agencies of cosmic masculinity. Speaking more broadly, the implicit methodological individualism that informed Gell’s framework in Art and Agency must concede that the relationship of art to personhood and to modernity may be and is culturally mediated, discursive, and historically unfinalized, as well as instrumental.

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David Lipset is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota. He has been engaged in ongoing fieldwork in the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea intermittently since 1981. His current interests include romance, class, and culture in the English-speaking world, and sorcery and modernity among the middle class in Papua New Guinea. Principal recent publications include “Modernity Without Romance? A Homeric Chronotope in Courtship Stories Told by Young Papua New Guinean Men” (2004a), and “‘The Trial’: A Parody of Law amid the Mockery of Men in Postcolonial Papua New Guinea” (2004b).
Notes

1. Here, he is rejecting the views of Coote (1992, 1996), Price (1989), and Morphy (1994, 1996), who seek to define the features of each culture’s aesthetics.

2. D’Alleva (2001) argued that Gell’s rejection of metaphor and metonym from his analysis of art cannot work in Polynesia. *Kaona* sculpture of Hawaii, for example, was a visual representation of mana (Kaepleppl 1982). In the Society Islands, braided headdresses made of human hair (*tamaui*) were indices of the lineage of the artist, which was explicitly understood through visual metaphor and metonymy. For Campbell (2001), art is not one-dimensional but may operate in different ways and at different levels within a single context. What is more, Campbell concluded, Vakutan aesthetic discourse does indeed shed light on local meanings of carving. Art, she argued, should thus be interrogated in several ways, not one. Merlan (2001) suggested that when applied to post-colonial contexts, Gell’s notion of art requires special treatment because the conditions of indexicality are no less complex than those in which their significance was originally created. In her example, the changing indexicality of Australian Aboriginal art becomes part of a wider shift in the majority white culture, according to which indigeneity is being re-evaluated as part of the broader development of a distinctive Australian identity.

3. See Weber (1958a: 245ff.).

4. Toddlers are forbidden to crawl. Children must first master the ability to climb up and down the house ladder, the accomplishment of which is ritually celebrated.

5. The prospective carver was subjected by his initiators to magical augmentation. His right index finger was cut and then rubbed with magic bark. He was plied with special foods to eat that had been prepared by post-menopausal women: a magical flower with a dry betel nut that he washed down with saltwater. After being beaten about the groin, he was permitted to begin to learn to carve on his own.

6. For example, in a story that Anenbi of Darapap village once told me, two boys, named Bwasê and Kabaga, went to war for the first time. Their mothers’ brothers anointed them with the powers of their brag spirits, Painsé and Tarégo, and gave them spears. The boys put two birds in baskets in the male cult hall, named the birds after their brag spirits, and paddled off not to face but rather to ambush the enemy: “Kabaga went to one side of a canal and Bwasê went to the other. They began to throw their spears and yell out the names of their brag spirits—Painsé! Tarégo! After a time, they switched sides of the canal and went on killing and yelling [out the names of their brag spirits]. Finally, their father screamed at them to leave at least one canoe alive to return home to beat the slit-drum and tell the story. But the two boys were deaf to him and went on killing. Some of the rear canoes escaped and fled back to their village.” In this excerpt, the two boys name birds, which are closely associated with brag spirits and with flight. The birds make them nimble, while their namesakes, the brag spirits, make them fierce and invulnerable. The boys ignore their father because, having been bespelled, their ears have ‘closed’ to the voices of others. They had become ‘canoes’ for the ego-alien, asocial identities of the spirits (see also Harrison 1993). It is thus the spirits of the names they call when they spear the enemy. The enemy, conspicuously, is referred to as “a canoe,” one of which should be allowed to return home to “tell the story.” Although it does not mention tutelary trance states, the story does present an effective précis of several points to which I have been alluding: the military powers of the brag spirits and their mimetic association with bird spirits, as well as the imagery of the canoe as a vehicle for travel, communication, and the enemy’s collective identity.


8. Or perhaps the canoe-body is a central concept of the Murik habitus (Bourdieu 1977). But habitus refers to generative notions of the body that create misrecognitions of domination, and so in this sense, because it refers to an item through which both material culture and the body are co-constructed, perhaps it is less of an appropriate term for this context than Redfield’s notion of world-view.
References


