



## Art

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*The definition of 'art' is extremely complicated. Its meaning has shifted radically, in particular in the last century. Originally, in Latin, it meant 'craft', but then for the last few centuries, the fine arts (such as painting, sculpture, or poetry) were defined in contraposition to craft. In the last century, the rejection of conventional artistic standards has resulted in the paradoxical definition of contemporary art as 'anti-art'. These changing definitions have been difficult to track for anthropologists. In the nineteenth century, art was not a central focus for anthropology, since it was identified with the fine arts of Western civilisation, and the task of anthropology was to study supposedly 'primitive peoples'. In the twentieth century, anthropologists rejected evolutionary theory and the idea that only Western civilisation had art, and some anthropological studies of art in non-Western cultures emerged. These studies showed how art objects revealed the complexity of the symbolic worlds of non-Western cultures. In the last few decades, a growing interest in material culture and in experimental research and writing led anthropologists to engage more closely with contemporary art. This work has reflected upon how art work can be seen as a form of social research, and how social research can be transformed by artistic practice and theory.*

### Introduction

The definition of 'art' has changed radically in the last few centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'art', and particularly the 'fine arts' of painting, sculpture, [architecture](#), music, theatre, [dance](#), and poetry, were often hailed as the highest achievements of Western civilisation. For the French philosopher Voltaire, all other peoples but Europeans were barbarians and children in terms of fine arts (Voltaire [1756] 2013). In the European narrative of progress and evolution, the peoples of earth were classified in a single line from 'primitive' to 'civilised', and the fine arts were one of the essential markers of Europe's higher civilisation. Anthropology was born in the nineteenth century, as the social science that studied assumedly 'primitive' peoples, i.e. those who, by definition, would not have fine arts. In consequence, 'art' was not the central focus of anthropological research at its origins.

However, in the twentieth century, the definition of art changed radically. The [revolutionary](#) artist movement, the avant-gardes, questioned the elitism of the fine arts, proposing instead to reunite art and everyday life. Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism proposed that any object of everyday life could be seen as an art object. Modern anthropology also went through a radical upheaval at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rejecting the evolutionism and [racism](#) of the previous century, a new generation of anthropologists defended that different cultures were not more or less evolved, 'high' or 'low'. Instead, anthropology showed that all cultures have their own forms of art, even if they don't take the form of

Western fine arts (Boas 1955, Coote and Shelton 1992, Forge 1972, Lévi-Strauss 1982). It could be argued that both art and anthropology in the twentieth century engaged in a cultural critique of Western civilisation (Marcus and Myers 1995, 94), as both did not take the West's normative and societal standards at face value anymore. However, the relation between these two forms of cultural critique has been quite complicated, and art was still quite marginal as an object of study in anthropology for most of the twentieth century. Only in the last few decades have anthropologists developed a growing relationship with contemporary art practice and theory. This shift is the result of two combined factors: on the one hand, a renewed interest in material culture: objects, artefacts, [technologies](#), and art. On the other hand, the call for a renewed, experimental anthropology. Both interests inevitably drive anthropology to contemporary art practice and theory, which is by definition experimental, and has had a long-standing critical interest in objects. This emerging body of work has highlighted the potential of art practice as a form of social research, as well as proposed experimental ways of rethinking anthropology through art (Garcia Canclini 2014, Elhaik 2016, Ingold 2013, Sansi 2014, Ssorin-Chaikov 2013, Strohm 2012).

### **Changing definitions of Western art**

Knowing how Western definitions of art have changed helps us understand anthropology's initially complicated relation with it. The Latin word *ars*, in the plural, means crafts. The crafts were manual [labour](#), and hence markers of a lower social status in ancient Greek and Roman societies. However, in the Middle Ages, Europe's 'liberal arts', the arts of language, music, and mathematics, were defined in clear distinction to the utilitarian crafts of artisans. Such liberal arts were the skills essential precisely to be a free man, not an artisan bound to manual work. Today's notion of obtaining a Bachelor or Master's degree in 'Arts' is founded in this idea of liberal arts (Shiner 2001).

In the Italian Renaissance, some crafts were re-defined as arts of drawing (*arti del disegno*) (Blunt 1940): painting, sculpture, and architecture were revaluated as intellectual endeavours, like poetry, with higher status than manual work. By the Enlightenment, the 'fine arts' were clearly separated from the crafts (Shiner 2001). The fine arts combined technical skill with humanistic Western culture, and they were taught in academies. They were often arts of representation, imitating nature. Western thinkers considered them to be exclusive of Western civilisation, and to be one of the institutions that marked the West's global superiority.

An interesting counterpoint to this Western-centric history is Chinese art, not least because China has historically also been a major imperial force. The Chinese had institutions and theories that can be considered equivalent to European fine arts, notably a tradition of scholar or literati painting that favoured subjective expression. Early modern Chinese art critics therefore concluded that European painting was not really fine art, as it lacked expressive depth. Instead they considered European painting to be just very skilful illustration, or craft (Lynn 2017). At the same time, Chinese arts, in particular porcelains and silks,

had been highly valuable luxury imports in Europe, where a taste for *chinoiserie*, i.e. for Chinese-looking art objects, had developed in the eighteenth century. Europeans also did not consider Chinese art to be fine art, but rather mere 'decorative art', a very skilful and beautiful craft. For Europeans, Chinese painting had not achieved the level of realism of European painting, which imitated reality almost to fool the eye (Lynn 2017).

In the nineteenth century, Western ideals of the artist would move even further away from craftsmanship. Artistic practice was free and self-motivated rather than commissioned: artists made art because they wanted to, because they need to express themselves. They were not artists simply because it was their job; they were not just skilful producers of fine objects for sale. Art was not just technique. The notion of artist as genius, a unique self-driven individual above the others, emerged in the Renaissance, but was consolidated in Romanticism.

But if art was different from technique and craft, it risked the reverse accusation from being menial work: that of not being useful, of being superficial and redundant. In the nineteenth century, as bourgeois [values](#) came to prominence in the West, aristocratic ideals of the fine arts were met with 'philistinism', the rejection of fine art in favour of utility, which was particularly popular in the English-speaking world (Arnold 1993). At the same time, in reaction to philistinism, the anti-utilitarian ideals of art were radicalised in theories of art for arts' sake, and the emergence of the bohemian, anti-bourgeois artist. For example, Baudelaire's 'painter of the modern life' was not a professional producer of paintings working in his studio, but an idler who immersed himself in the city crowd walking, sitting in cafés, and wasting his time, in direct contraposition to the [ethics](#) of the bourgeoisie, which valued hard work and saving time (Baudelaire 1995). Modern art would not be a specialised form of work, or a profession, but a nonconformist, utopian form of life. The big work of art of the bohemian artist was now his own life. As contemporary French curator Nicolas Bourriaud put it, 'Modern art rejects to separate the finished product from existence [...] The act of creation is to create oneself' (Bourriaud 1999, 13). This ideal of the modern artist is deeply connected to [revolutionary](#) ideals: in the *German ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels proposed that work and life, production and creation, should be one thing: in opposition to capitalist alienation, the communist mode of production would be based on the identity of work and art, as a unified form of life (1970). Paradoxically, elitist ideals of fine art, originally meant to grant a better social position to the fine artist above the craftsman, were now, in their radicalisation, throwing the new bohemian artist to the margin of bourgeois society. This margin itself was also paradoxical in various ways: it raised questions as to whether artists were impostors or prophets, decadent or revolutionary, idlers or merely self-absorbed. Not to mention that the figure of the bohemian 'artist' was, by definition, a man: women in the nineteenth century could not afford to behave as bohemians as, like in previous centuries, they were not recognised as [professionals](#).

The utopian drive of modern art was radicalised even further by early twentieth century avant-gardes.

Dadaism did not simply reject academic styles of artistic production to propose new styles, but rejected fine art altogether, and the 'civilisation' that sustained it. Dadaist art was meant to be an 'anti-art' (Richter 1965) that simply rejected art as skill, technique, and academic profession, and replaced careful production with encounter, chance, appropriation, performance, research, and experimentation. Dadaism meant to abolish the separation between art and everyday life, and the anti-artist actively unlearned the fine arts by encountering and experimenting with what the art world had previously despised: industry and [technology](#), so-called 'primitive' [colonial](#) cultures, and marginal, outsider forms of art practice (Foster 2004). Undoing art also meant undoing artists as agents of production, either as geniuses or skilled artisans, and as an empowered subject; anti-artists are rather mediators that withdraw their agency (Kester 2011) and they are driven by chance and experimentation. Just like the utopian objective of the avant-garde was to dissolve art in everyday life, so did 'anti-artists' have to disappear into common people and the claim that everybody should be an artist.

Contemporary art since the second-half of the twentieth century has preserved the ideas and practices of anti-art but has changed its utopian horizon. It tends to focus on modest 'micro-utopias' achievable today rather than in the future (Bourriaud 2002, Sansi 2014, Blanes et al. 2016). Contemporary art practices have become more site-specific, collaborative, and participatory, delegating agency to local communities. In contemporary anti-art practices, artists are much more than mere producers of art objects. They often act as something else: as activists, historians, even anthropologists (Garcia Canclini 2014). They may serve as mediators in general terms, as those that help mobilise a multitude of agents around a particular project. However, this new role for artists poses a clear contradiction: differently from the utopian avant-garde, contemporary artists do not withdraw from art as a profession and institution but instead stick to it. The projects they mediate, even if they are participatory, experimental, and utopian, are still art projects, [financed](#) by art institutions, and projected by artists. The fine arts, an institution defined by museums, academies, galleries, artists, thus still exist today, even if contemporary art practice is not constrained to traditional techniques like painting or sculpture. The extent to which it is even possible to be an artist doing anti-art has been the subject of heated discussions for many decades (Sansi 2014) and conditions the relation between art and anthropology, as we will see.

### **Art and anthropology**

What is art, then, for anthropology? Craft? Fine arts? Anti-art? The radical changes in the definition, theory, and practice of art have been difficult to track for anthropologists. In the nineteenth century, anthropology was mostly practiced in museums of arts and technologies, where the frame of reference was evolutionary theory: anthropologists collected and compared axes, sails, pots, and idols, and established the position of their corresponding culture in the pyramid of human progress. More advanced arts and technologies were held to be proof of superior civilisation. But the arts that [anthropology museums](#)

collected were classified as crafts: useful, practical artefacts. Even if they were figurative and symbolic, [ethnographic](#) artefacts were defined as having specific uses, for example, ‘magico-religious’ ones (Morphy and Perkins 2009). The fine arts—art for arts’ sake—barely figured in most of these museums, because they were seen as an exclusively Western institution.

In the twentieth century, however, new schools of anthropology rejected evolutionism, and the idea that some cultures were more civilised than others. Art was not an exclusive property of Western civilisation; when looking closely, all cultures turned out to have art. Anthropologist Franz Boas, for example, drawing mostly on his fieldwork amongst Native Americans, applied the methods and theories of art history to study the symbolism and style of totem poles, baskets, and masks as works of art (Boas 1955). Boas argues that artistic creation is part of a universal pursuit of aesthetic [values](#), one that leads artists in different parts of the world to develop specific standards of beauty by developing artistic technique. Boas’ case for the universality of art discredits [racist](#) ideas of immutable ethnic difference, by showing that the mental processes of all peoples are fundamentally the same.

However, Boas’ interest in art didn’t have many followers, in part because of anthropology’s changing methods and focus. The collection of objects for museums of arts and technologies gave way to direct field research. The task of the anthropologist became to describe cultures in their whole complexity, through written ethnographies. Thereby, ethnographers often focused on the immaterial aspects of the cultures they studied, like their kinship systems, social structure, or mythology, rather than their material culture. This is in part because the material culture and [technology](#) of many of the peoples initially studied by anthropologists seemed poor, or at least less ostentatious than that of modern industrial civilisation. The default belief in technological evolution was not fully discarded for most of the twentieth century, and ‘art’ was likely still associated with Western fine arts for most anthropologists. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (2006, 8) argued, quite convincingly, that the uneasiness with art in anthropology is the result of a ‘professional philistinism’, a rejection of art because of prejudices regarding the perceived elitism of the fine arts in the West.

This professional philistinism was probably more accentuated in Anglo-American academia than in continental Europe (Clifford 1988). In France, the new discipline of ethnology had very close links to the artistic avant-gardes in the 1920s and 1930s, notably surrealism. Surrealist writers like Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille studied with anthropologist Marcel Mauss, and together with another anthropologist Marcel Giraule published the journal *Documents*. What brought them together? If the task of the anthropologist was to describe the ‘exotic’, (or today the ‘strange’) as familiar, then the objective of the surrealist was in many ways the diametrical opposite: to render evident how Western culture can be incredibly strange (Clifford 1988). This inversion of positions, from the strange to the familiar and the familiar to the strange, makes both processes complementary. In fact, the ultimate aim of anthropology, like surrealism, was not just to describe other cultures, but also to put them in comparison with Western

culture. Both tried to develop a critical attitude towards what Western culture takes for granted, making Westerners aware that what they take as 'natural', like the family or the market economy, may not be so 'natural' after all.

We can find an excellent example thereof in a short article by Griaule, entitled 'Gunshot' (in Bataille 1995). The article was based on a picture of an African drum with a carving representing a man with a gun. This representation was shocking to a European public looking for 'authentic' African art. But Griaule argued that for many Africans, European guns were what African masks were for Europeans: exotic and interesting objects.

If a black [man] cannot without debasing himself use an exotic element, namely a European one familiar to him, what is one to make of our blind borrowings from an exotic world one of colour about which we must in self-defence declare to know nothing? (Griaule in Bataille 1995, 65).

Griaule was proposing to take the inverse position: to look at things from an African perspective, as if the French were exotic themselves.

The open exchange between surrealism and ethnology had an enduring influence on the next generation of anthropologists, like Jean Rouch and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Jean Rouch was inspired by surrealist experimental cinema in his ethnographic films, for example, *Les maitres fous* (Henley 2020). Lévi-Strauss integrated surrealist ideas of 'objective chance' into his theory of the 'savage mind', or more properly, the 'everyday mind': for Lévi-Strauss, our understanding of the world is constantly being transformed by events that are the result of chance; but, we give them meaning by putting them in relation to previous events (1966). Lévi-Strauss worked on art, partially reprising the work of Boas, in the book *The way of the masks* (1982). He compared the masks of different Native American peoples, showing how they not only reflected their mythologies, but also how these mythologies were related and had meaning in relation to each other. The masks were studied as a vehicle of meaning, complementing Lévi-Strauss' main interest, which were mythologies. Lévi-Strauss's approach was massively influential in anthropology, and studies of art that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s often followed his perspective, investigating the meaning of works of art (see for example, Forge 1973).

For the performative arts, Victor Turner's work on ritual was very influential in the 1960s and 1970s as well. Turner was interested in the symbolism of rituals, rather than myths. In a broadly comparative analysis of symbolic action across time and place, he suggested that ritual myth, tragedy, and comedy had become mostly conservative art forms in industrialised societies. Modern arts and [sciences](#), on the other hand, had the potential to change social relationships, as they largely developed apart from mainstream society (Turner 1973). Turner's work emphasised human creativity in symbolic expression, arguing that social change is not path dependent on social structure. His work resulted in a growing interest and interconnection with studies of performance and theatre.

## Renewed interest in material culture

In the 1980s, the relation between art and anthropology changed radically. This was driven by two important factors, namely anthropologists' renewed interest in objects and material culture, and by calls for a new experimental [ethnography](#).

The new interest in material culture was partially the result of debates about appropriation and institutional critique in art. Landmark exhibitions like MOMA's 'Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> century art (1984)' improved the cultural status of 'primitive' ethnographic artefacts in the public eye by arguing that some of these artefacts were in fact fine art and should be displayed as such (Rubin 1984). This argument has been very influential in the following decades, with the reorganisation of ethnographic collections into fine art collections, in new museums like Paris' Quai Branly. Nevertheless, it was also extremely polemical, since it enshrined a classical European concept of fine art that had played down the cultural specificity of these artifacts and their historical provenance: mostly, they were [colonial](#) plunder. Anthropologists have since debated the contextual and institutional [values](#) that transform objects into art (Price 1988, Myers 2001), produced ethnographies about the trade and circulation of 'primitive' and 'tourist' arts (Steiner 1994, Phillips & Steiner 1999), and investigated the transformation, circulation, and traffic in art and culture in general (Marcus and Myers 1995, Thomas 1991), including the emergence of contemporary art worlds in [postcolonial](#) settings (Myers 2002, Fillitz 2018). The debate on colonial collections has intensified in the last decade, with calls for decolonisation and the restitution of colonial collections (Hicks 2020, Oswald & Tinius 2020).

These debates resulted in wider discussion on the power of art. One central contribution was made by Alfred Gell (1998). He argued that material things such as traps or artworks are best understood with reference to their potential social and material effects, rather than their meaning. Gell highlighted that human agency does not end with the human body, but that it is in fact distributed via people's material culture. Art would be a paradigmatic example of such 'distributed agency', since it is purposefully imbued with the agency of the artist. Gell's notion of art was substantially different to what had been discussed in anthropology up to then, for Gell did not approach art objects first and foremost as vehicles of meaning, like Boas, Lévi-Strauss or Turner did. As such, Gell's approach to art was finally catching up to modern and contemporary art, where works of art are not necessarily a means of conveying meaning or 'representing' something else. Instead, modern and contemporary art can simply be agents performing actions on those who engage with them. Thus, Gell gave anthropology a theory to engage with contemporary art and he questioned the division between art and artefact in non-modern societies. His theory considers art to be as 'useful' as artefacts are and it questions the very notion of 'utility', and of useful 'work' (as opposed to useless play or art) upon which much bourgeois philistinism and modern utopian thought had been premised (Sansi 2014). As mentioned before, the utopian ideal of Europe's early twentieth century art avant-gardes was to dissolve art and the artist into everyday life. This dissolution of the artist as an agent



in art goes much further for them than Gell's still quite human-centric notion of distributed agency presupposes. Ultimately, however, Gell's focus on distributed agency makes it easier to question the notion of the artist as an individual genius, unique author, and uniquely powerful agent.

### **Experimental ethnography**

A second key factor that transformed the relation between art and anthropology in the 1980s was the growing interest in experimental [ethnography](#). The 'writing culture' movement (Clifford & Marcus 1986) gave equal relevance to the form in which ethnography was presented to its content: Ethnography was not only a scientific task but also an art form, in the most classical sense, a technique that uses rhetoric to seduce and convince. In anthropology as elsewhere there was no politics without poetics, and claims for an 'experimental' ethnography emerged. Such calls for experimental writing met many detractors who levelled criticisms not very dissimilar to the attacks on 'art for art's sake' in the nineteenth century (Scholte 1987). In the long run, the claim to rethink the 'poetics and politics' of ethnography seems to have emphasised the second rather than the first term; the need to justify the 'politics' of anthropological practice is still a central concern today, while the need to justify the discipline's poetics seems less relevant for most anthropologists. One question that still needs to be assessed is if one can really distinguish one from the other.

Fighting back against this reluctance of 'poetics', new proposals of experimental ethnography emerged, introducing ethnographic methods 'beyond text' (Cox, Irving and Wright 2016). '[Visual anthropology](#)' proposes an anthropology not only with images, but also of images, inspired by the growing interdisciplinary field of visual studies (Mitchell 2005, Belting 2011, Pinney 2011). Besides film, and [photography](#), other forms of practice, like sound walks and art installations, have also been used as methods of experimental ethnography. These developments show that anthropology's dual goal of describing the world and rethinking it may well be achieved with the help of art. The 'ethnographic turn' in late twentieth century art (Foster 1995), in which many artists were interested in working with anthropology, has been reciprocal, and some anthropologists have actively engaged with artistic practice. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright have offered several examples of this growing field of exchanges (2005, 2010, 2013), focusing on the collaboration between artists and anthropologists at the level of practice, and confronting artistic and anthropological methodologies. One example would be George Marcus's collaboration with artists Fernando Calzadilla and Abdel Hernández, that made a scenography or *mise-en-scène* of a Venezuelan market at Rice University in Texas, entitled *The market from here* (1997). This scenography, for Marcus, offers possibilities of study that go beyond conventional ethnographic description in a text. It recreates an ethnographic scene and forces us to reflect on its constitutive parts, turning a social setting into an artifact and enactment (Marcus in Schneider and Wright 2005). In these terms, artistic installations and performances can be seen as devices through which a field of study is



recreated (Sansi 2014, Estalella and Sanchez Criado 2018).

In the last few years, the multiplication of new digital media has promoted a shift from 'visual anthropology' to 'multimodal anthropology', which uses various different media like photography, design, sound, [games](#), etc. (Collins, Durlington and Gill 2017; Dattatreya and Marrero 2019). One fundamental question that these experimental approaches raise is that of authorship. Changing the form and method of ethnography changes the agency of the ethnographer. The 'writing culture' movement, and the 'crisis of representation' that it signified (Marcus and Fischer 1986), asked what authority anthropologists have to represent another culture and what agency other [voices](#) should have in anthropological narratives. It was a crisis in authority and authorship. Artistic avant-gardes had already proposed to question the agency of the artist as an author in much more radical ways. Experimental art in the twentieth century starts from the withdrawal of agency, and unlearning technique, not simply from the experimentation with new media. At its best, then, experimental and multimodal ethnography can learn from artistic practice to further question ethnographic authority, rather than simply propose new media for the expression of the 'creative' anthropologist as author. Art and anthropology still have more to teach to one another about authority and agency.

### **Rethinking art and anthropology**

The on-going crisis of [ethnographic](#) authority is central to contemporary anthropology (Rabinow et al. 2008). George Marcus (2000) identified fundamental shifts in the conditions of contemporary ethnographic practice: the radical difference in background and hierarchy between anthropologists and 'natives' of colonial ethnography has given way to studying people of the same or superior social status than the anthropologists themselves. Sometimes these people are 'experts' in neighbouring fields whom the anthropologist cannot simply work *on*, but whom she must work *with*. Moreover, ethnography is no longer an arcane method owned by anthropologists, but an experimental elaboration of everyday experience that has been used not only by anthropologists, but also by other social scientists, artists, and designers, for example. Lastly, the sites of anthropological research have become plural in a globalised world: the connection between 'native' and site is not a given, as any informant or collaborator may also be from somewhere else. Field sites become a particular configuration or assemblage of collaborators with different backgrounds and origins, a sometimes-virtual working space; what Marcus names a 'para-site', a laboratory for collective work and experimentation where the anthropologist is no longer an individual author (2000). In this contemporary situation, fieldwork can simply mean creating new assemblages of knowledge and practice, a practice in which anthropologists and artists can collaborate more than ever before. Art occupies a particular space in this contemporary world. Collaboration, participation, and relation have become central to artistic practice in the last decades and the debates around the possibilities and limitations thereof have been intense (Bourriaud 2002, Bishop 2012, Kester 2011). It seems both art and

anthropology can now be rethought of in light of one another.

A number of authors have looked at these questions from different perspectives. Tarek Elhaik (2016) has proposed that art curation can offer an alternative approach to classical ethnographic methods. In contrast to the classical ethnographic method, understood as a direct representation of a single 'field', curation as an assemblage of differences can be seen as a method that corresponds to the new kinds of sites that anthropologists work with, characterised by multiplicity, excess, and ambiguity between the object and the subject of representation and collaboration. The anthropologist as curator would have the role of mediator in these assemblages. For example, Rafael Schacter (Schacter 2018, Sansi 2019) has worked as a curator of graffiti and street art, bringing together not just artists from radically different backgrounds in a single exhibition space, but also confronting the radical difference between conventional art exhibition spaces and street art that by definition is outside of a gallery space. His experience as a curator has also been constitutive of his understanding of this field in its transformations as an anthropologist.

Tim Ingold has proposed that artists, similar to anthropologists, study the world, which is marked by flux and constant change. Anthropology can learn from contemporary art practices as both sets of activities are embodied processes geared at awakening our senses so as to better correspond with the world around us (2013). Ingold thus suggests that engaging with artistic practice, such as drawing, basket weaving, or pottery, can teach students to become better anthropologists.

Analysing past collaborations between anthropologists and artists, Kiven Strohm (2012) picks up Schneider and Wright's arguments that both art and anthropology deal in representation. Yet, contemporary art, Strohm argues, celebrates ambiguity and free play between text, image, discourse, and figure and much of it is open-ended and inherently incomplete. 'Collaboration' between art and anthropology, he argues, should start from an acknowledgement of basic equality between anthropologist and research subject. This equality questions the division of [labour](#) between different 'experts' in collaborative work and requires us to unlearn our own points of view.

Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2013) equally highlights similarities between art and anthropology. He holds that artistic practice is an appropriate anthropological research tool, and that anthropology itself can be considered an artistic method. Ssorin-Chaikov specifically draws on conceptual art, which he argues is concerned less with aesthetics and beauty, and more with analysing and manufacturing social realities and concepts. He holds conceptual art and anthropology to be similar in that both construct the realities that they study, both are largely conceptual in nature, and both highlight what is unknown in the world. This view of anthropological and artistic practice is a far cry from merely trying to represent a given reality. For example, Felix Ringel, doing fieldwork in Hoyerswerda, a German city in an accelerated process of urban decay, organised an 'Anthrocamp' for the local youth, in which they were encouraged to explore their hometown and generate images and artwork. The results were displayed in an ephemeral installation in an

abandoned block that was going to be demolished (Ringel 2013). These practices, partially borrowed from collaborative art, do not just provide data to ethnographers but also highlight their performative role in intervening and transforming their field of study.

For all these authors, contemporary art appears as a model for unlearning anthropology, its practices and institutions. And yet, it is a contradictory model, because as we have seen, in spite of all the utopian and [revolutionary](#) ideas and practices of art in the last century, the institutions of classical fine arts, the museum, the art work, the artist, the curator, etc. are still very much in place. Modern and contemporary art has led the way into a revolutionary, utopian form of life, but the outcomes of this revolution have been mixed so far. The current dissatisfaction of many anthropologists is not just grounded on the limitations of existing methods and theories, but more generally in their working conditions, the increasing [bureaucratisation](#) of academic life, and the productivity requirements that render academic work increasingly difficult. They share this alienated feeling with work in contemporary capitalism more broadly. In this sense, rather than seeking inspiration in art and artists to become more creative and inventive, anthropologists may consider artists, art workers, and other members of the culture and knowledge sector as possible allies with whom to rethink, and perhaps undo, their institutions (Sansi and Strathern 2016).

### **Conclusion: The complicated object of art**

The relation between art and anthropology is complicated. This is partially because ‘art’ can mean very different things: from craft to fine art to anti-art. In consequence, an anthropology of art can address different kinds of objects and ask radically different questions, studying artistic technique and style, its symbolism and meaning and learning about its agency. Moreover, the radically different definitions of art are not mutually exclusive, although we have described them in a historical sequence and different definitions co-exist. After a century of anti-art theories and practices, the dominant institutions and in fact, the dominant form of art in many contemporary societies, are still the fine arts, while true anti-art mostly remains a utopia. Perhaps the complicated nature of art is also what makes art so ‘good to think with’. More than merely an object of study, art can be a model of how to rethink, experiment, and undo anthropological practice itself. Rather than merely representing individual cultures or features of social life, art may inspire us to define our own utopian horizons.

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