

John Onians

A Natural History of Art: Necessity or Mirage?



Born in 1942. BA, Classics, Cambridge University (1963); Graduate Diploma in the History of European Art, Courtauld Institute (1965); Ph.D. on Renaissance architectural theory, Warburg Institute, London University (1968). Taught at Syracuse University, NY, and Amsterdam University, before moving to the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, where he has taught since 1971, most recently as Professor in the newly founded School of World Art Studies. In 1978 he founded the journal *Art History*, which he edited till 1988. He published *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic Age* in 1979, *Bearers of Meaning. The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* in 1988 and *Sight and Insight*, a volume of essays dedicated to his teacher E. H. Gombrich, in 1994. — Address: School of World Art Studies and Museology, University of East Anglia, GB - Norwich NR4 7TJ.

The Wissenschaftskolleg in the Grunewald during the 1994-95 session provided the perfect place and time to reflect on the nature and origins of art as a worldwide phenomenon. Indeed, so close was the relation between subject and setting that I came to feel that I could not have done it anywhere else. The tensions between the highest categories of culture and the darkest realities of nature, which were necessarily associated with a scientific institution in the middle of the woods would always have been productive, but here there were other forces at work, too. Most important was the range of nationalities represented by the other fellows during this year, which was a constant reminder of the variety of cultures in the world. Here too, in this Berlin forest, there was also the spirit of Alexander von Humboldt, who two hundred years ago found a way of understanding the worldwide distribution of another aesthetic phenomenon, the flower. If there was a major obstacle to my enterprise it was the resistance inherent in the international intellectual community to treating any aspect of culture as a natural manifestation. This resistance was perhaps especially strong at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year. Not only is the idea that culture has a natural basis alien to

recent German thinking, but the foreign scholars, whatever their original backgrounds, were often intent on asserting the universality of the cultural values they shared. Fortunately, though, this resistance was offset by implicit support from another area in which the Wissenschaftskolleg is strong, the biological sciences. Viewing the human being as an animal, as I was committed to do, meant that however the faculties which allow the production of art are eventually classified by those working in the so-called humanities, they must be seen by biologists as inherited predispositions, in whose formation ecological adaption played a substantial role. With such a dynamic conjunction of favourable and unfavourable environmental conditions, the Wissenschaftskolleg offered a perfect ecology in which to breed — and test the survivability of — the theories which would be necessary if the idea of a natural history of art towards which I was moving was to prove more than a mirage.

Since such theories had to be based on an understanding of the nature of *homo sapiens* as an animal, much of the year was spent exploring recent writings by cognitive scientists, neuropsychologists, primatologists etc. in order to learn more about the links between brain and eye and hand which lie behind our species' distinctive proclivity for 'artistic' activity. Among the pleasant — and relatively uncontested — discoveries were that the acquisition of such essential attributes as soft fingertips, polychrome vision, group socialisation and a good memory are all likely to be associated with a change to a fruit diet. More exciting — though more open to dispute — is the possibility that the neural links which make speech possible were not developed for that purpose. If the evidence which points increasingly in this direction continues to build up, the role of speech in the distinctive mental development of humans would be diminished and that of visual communication and knowledge acquisition would be dramatically enhanced. This would have major implications for the understanding of the human mind. It would also radically affect our perception of the way culture is formed. Visual experience of the environment would gain in importance at the expense of the aural absorption of knowledge. This would help to explain the extraordinary richness of human artistic activity. It would also provide a frame of reference for understanding such otherwise puzzling phenomena as the persistence in difference between the artistic traditions of areas of Europe over many thousands of years. Why, for example, does the art of France, as much in 30,000 BC as today, show a relatively greater interest in food, animals, sex — and objects of desire generally — and that of Germany a relatively greater interest in predators — and objects of fear? Given that in both areas the traditions are only intermittent, with almost no art produced during the last glaciation, the continuity of

interest cannot be explained on the basis of the verbal construction of culture. If, on the other hand, it is related to consistently differentiated visual experiences of the environment due to variations of climate, vegetation, animal life etc. the continuity is readily interpreted... This at least is the argument of the natural history of art which is emerging as a result of this year's researches. To admit that I have not arrived any later than the second millennium BC is depressing, but to feel that I have reviewed a hundred million years or so of our ancestors' neuropsychology and have written a preliminary account of the first fifty thousand years or so of human artistic activity is, in the circumstances, reassuring. The fear must only be that the outside world will be less kind to new ideas than the Wissenschaftskolleg, where critics with whom one shared excellent food and wine inevitably became friends and so more indulgent to personal fantasy!

Whether or not individual ideas survive in the outside world, what is undeniable is that my own view not just of art but of all human activities has been transformed as a result of my readings during the year. An example of the extent to which this is true is provided by the transformation of a small project with which I had been involved for some time. This was an essay on the meaning of the column. My initial approach to meaning was through language, and especially architectural metaphor, which was indeed the topic of my initial proposal for the year at the Kolleg. During the year, however, as I increasingly saw metaphorical language less as a shaper of mental experience and more as an index of deeper and more direct visually based neuropsychological engagements with the physical world, I found it more useful to relate meaning to magic than to metaphor. This was because it seemed to me that the use of pillars in magic rituals recorded in the Hittite Near East could be usefully related to the cognitive operations of other primates. Although the idea that a pillar might represent argumentativeness and its overturning an ending of that predisposition is beyond any chimpanzee, the magic effect of such a ritual probably depends on just such an underlying ability to attribute temporary instrumental value to an object and to derive psychological benefit from the sight of its destruction or modification as is common among the apes. Apes are also able to behave towards inanimate objects as if they share properties with a live thing to which they bear a resemblance, treating, for example, a ball of moss as if it has the attributes of a baby, and this trait too might contribute a key to the understanding of the effectiveness of such magic. The same mechanism which enables the ape to see moss as a baby and to treat it as such would allow a human being to see a vertical pillar as man-like, and to credit it with human attributes. It is a small step to regarding those

attributes as gone when the pillar is overturned or destroyed. Viewed in this way it is possible to see not only the effectiveness of magic and the persuasiveness of architectural metaphor, but the meaning of the column itself, as depending on a neuropsychological inheritance we share with other primates. All of which is more acceptable now that we also know that we have in common with them 99 per cent of our DNA.

Some will say that to end a year in the woods with such a declaration of kinship with monkeys represents the worst form of ecological adaptation. But where else should one spend time if one wants to find out about that 99 per cent of our nature and its influence on our culture?