

Antropologia Portuguesa

Volume 20/21
2003/2004

Departamento de Antropologia | Universidade de Coimbra

Marcus, G. E.; Myers, F. R. (eds.) 1995. *The traffic in culture: refiguring art and anthropology*. London, University of California Press Ltd. 380 p. ISBN 0-520-08847-6. £ 16,95.

I was first given a copy of 'The Traffic in Culture' nearly six years ago to review for the Oxford Art Journal. Although, I dutifully read it, and scribbled extensive notes and comments in the margins, the review was never completed. Five years later I read the work again for a course I was teaching and found that I had substantially changed my opinion from the marginalia that I had previously written. Then, the next year, after reading it a third time, still struck by the book's importance for the discipline, its provocative stand against 'art writing,' and the fruitful lines of research that it continued to open, I felt compelled to rewrite and complete the task I had began all those years ago, if for no other reason but to ensure students would not miss its relevance for the different courses they were pursuing.

While it is peculiarly structured and narrowly focused, the simple, central ideas behind 'The Traffic in Culture' are redolent with insights and perspectives that not only encourage a reconsideration of the history of the anthropology of art, but chart new directions for its future. Although it nowhere explicitly states as much, the work is almost a synthesis of American anthropology's interest in art during the early part of the final decade of the last century. If the first half of the century was dominated by Boas, Kroeber, and later Sapir's emphasis on cultural patterning, and its consequential aestheticisation of other cultures in the works of Laura Thompson, Ruth Benedict and others, the second half ended with the fragmentation and dissolution of the 'other' and its incorporation into rapidly emerging world systems in which art and aesthetics themselves survived only as fragmentary, disjunctured, and hybrid intercultural representations and subject positions. According to Marcus and Myers, the essays they have collected together, seven previously published and five freshly commissioned, represent a move away from established concerns with mediating the relationship between aesthetics and art within specific cultures for western audiences, to the construction of a more critical discipline. The authors examine anthropology's junctures with art practices; they interrogate the basis of their mutual dependencies, and they address strategies aimed at creating the necessary distance between the two discourses to enable anthropology to reconstitute art as a subject of study. Whether, the unity of the book has been constructed retrospectively by the rationalising gloss provided by Marcus and Myers introduction, or whether common sets of issues had already

been independently approached from similar methodological standpoints will not concern us here, anymore than the partial accusations of one-upmanship, competitive writing, and “hipness” which the editors ungenerously launch against their rival art critics. Through whatever process and strategy of bricolage they adopted, the result, providing it continues to resist deconstructive criticism, is incontestably impressive and can be expected to chart new direction for the anthropology of art and encourage the continuous widening of its subject to include western as well as non-western art practices. Indeed, as Myers’ paper on Aboriginal acrylic paintings; Mullins’ work on the American Southwest, and Goldstein’s analysis of the cultural discourses and consumer values that cluster around female makeup in urban America, clearly demonstrate, it is doubtful whether it is any longer possible to construct an ethnography on any local art community or practice without taking into consideration national and global influences, tastes and market strategies.

Marcus and Myers contend that art has increasingly challenged anthropology’s monopoly over the field of cultural analysis. They argue that the Kantian legacy by which aesthetics was affirmed as a realm of human judgement, independent of utilitarian practical reason and moral values, permitted the separation and autonomy of art from non-art. Once externalised, art assumed the propensity to develop itself critically against culture. The “... discursive separation of art from culture created a part of culture that, like anthropology itself, had culture as its object.” (Marcus and Myers 1995: 7). Art made itself the critic of modernity, providing its own perspectives and alternative commentary. This preoccupation with its own autonomy to define what it is not and therefore better circumscribe its subject, prompted Adorno to comment: “What is social about art is its intrinsic movement against society, not its manifest statement Insofar as a social function can be ascribed to art, it is its functionlessness” (*ibid.*). Although it might be functionless, the authors represented here would agree, art is hardly ever disinterested.

Marcus and Myers blame anthropology’s previous lack of interest in questions over boundaries for accepting the division between it and art history, in which anthropology assumed authority over the study of art in small scale and ‘primitive’ societies, while the latter focused on the industrial west. At the same time, anthropology narrowed its focus by dismissing the study of high culture, while leaving art history to attack its pretensions. This discursive division of the field resulted in a skewering of anthropology’s object, which has led to the stereotyping of non-Western art practices and failure to recognise the links between local practices and regional, national and global contingencies. Mullins’ paper,

for example, clearly identifies the role of the east coast elite in marketing, and encouraging and regulating the production of Southwest art and crafts, while Hart documents the effects of art institutions and international exhibitions on Hindu devotional expressions. Not only have tourist and contemporary art markets re-categorised devotional paintings, but stimulated the emergence of a parallel system of production with their own distinctive practices, techniques and divisions of labour, determined by radically dissimilar market orientations.

Complicity between anthropology and art, allowed anthropology to establish the stable image of the 'other' that characterised its field for much of the 20th century; an image which provided the trope which art used to criticise western modernism and elite values. Marcus and Myers see anthropology's holistic and relativist approach as crucial in exposing the interconnectedness between art and its wider cultural contexts, and refuting its carefully guarded essentialisms. Art production only needs to be foregrounded in the art criticism that surrounds it, to disclose the culturally specific art world of which it is part. By using the cover term 'art writing' the editors come to include a panoply of related discourses, which they fear constitute 'a discursive space that is a significant barrier to the independent perspectives of anthropology'. Shared subject interests have created 'family resemblances' between anthropology and 'art writing', which have given rise to entrenched competitive discourses between the disciplines. The hostility of art writers towards anthropological authority can be seen in its attempts to try to subsume or repudiate it. In the first strategy, as Foster describes, the artist identifies with a quasi-anthropology in which he plays advocate for a primitivised or subaltern 'other', which is always located 'outside' or 'elsewhere.' Sometimes, it is presented as a site of primal psychic revelation. Whatever its qualities, it represents a potent source of alterity, inimical to bourgeois values, which the artist curator attempts to identify with and expropriate for his/her own work. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the inverse strategy of repudiation in her chapter on the Los Angeles Festival where experience is extolled over explanation. The ambiguous relation between anthropology and art writing, although surfacing in a good number of papers, provides a more specific focus for two of the volumes contributors. Sullivan distinguishes between the two discourses by suggesting that art writers do not use theories and commentaries as arguments, but are content to juxtapose them for evaluation in a 'poetics of attitude', or what Marcus and Meyer call 'an aesthetics of novelty and "hipness"'. Hal Foster on the other hand acknowledges there is an envy felt by anthropologists for art, as well as a reciprocal feeling experienced by artists and critics for anthropology.

The family resemblance between the two discourses, Marcus and Myers believe, are nevertheless beginning to diverge, not through any effect of post-modernist logic, but by the increasingly visible proximity between art, money, and power, which is viewed as a direct threat against art's claim to autonomy and its integrity as a critical discourse paradoxically aimed against those that sponsor and invest in it. The contradictions inherent to an art world that legitimates itself by a Kantian metanarrative is clarified in Marcus' article that examines a small group of New York artists who exhibited together in 'Power'. For this group, despite experimenting with new strategies to distance themselves from commoditisation, and progressively attenuating their critiques of capitalism and the market, the value of their works continued to spiral upwards as the market pursued them relentlessly. In the end the only way they could protest their critical credibility was to identify themselves as tricksters, masters of parody, whose criticism of the system that supports them is taken to simply verify their own analytical superiority. While Marcus focuses on producers, Vance examines the receptors and sponsors of art exhibitions, particularly the effect of right-wing political challenges against art's prerogative to constitute itself independently of moral communities, and the use of national sources of funding to reshape what it considers excesses. Both these papers, focusing on different positions within the arts community, effectively illustrate the fallacy of art's supposed autonomy.

Marcus and Myers envisage that a more independent anthropology of art would be focused on two broad projects; the assessment of sites, positions and critical insights within cultural formations, and the examination of the social processes in which cultural values are produced and defined. While anthropology can no longer use the 'other' as a device to relativise cultural practices within western societies, it is able to question the autonomy of art in three ways; first, by focusing on the strategies it uses to appropriate difference; second, its attitudes towards its internal and external boundaries, and third, by examining the circulation of objects and their concomitant values and significations in the different contexts of their life histories. All the essays within this collection are related to one or other of these strategies and consequently to what Marcus and Myers define as the exposure of the art world as a cultural world. Steiner for example characterises African art dealers as intermediaries, unable to exercise influence either on production, which is in the hands of village craftsmen, or the demand for pieces, influenced by museums, publications, auctions and tourism. He describes the distancing dealers attempt to create, to maintain the object's exoticism, between the

'primary suppliers of art' and their consumers. He discusses sales strategies, the performance and scenography of authenticity, and the means adopted for the fulfilment of existing preconceptions regarding the art. Myers discusses the role of art writing in reinforcing primal images of the authenticity of aboriginal acrylic paintings, while also pointing out counter discourses which seek to assimilate it as contemporary art and others which reject it as contemporary or primitive art. Feld discusses how similar practices are applied to the transnationalisation of local music by established rock musicians and recording companies.

For all its rhetoric and sometimes brilliant insights, 'The Traffic in Culture', while opening an anthropological front against art writing, never provides any convincing epistemological justification for the privileged position it attempts to win over its rival, leaving one to wonder whether anthropology isn't as much part of culture as is art. Furthermore, the history of anthropology has repeatedly demonstrated its own immersion in the culture that it claims as its subject; the close colonial associations between British, French and Dutch anthropology; the interweaving of American anthropology with issues of 'national security' and, in the case of museum anthropology, the patronage of wealthy philanthropists - Peabody, Fowler, Hirst and Wellcome - for buildings, galleries and collections. The inclusion of papers by Sullivan and Vance, that focus on art institutions to provide the context for discussion on the relations between artists and galleries on the one hand, and national politics, moral controversies and market strategies on the other, and not others dealing with ethnographic museums, maintains an anthropological boundary which itself safeguards the discipline succumbing to similar criticism that it reserves for art writing.

Lastly, as in much of the American social sciences, 'The Traffic in Culture' encapsulates a specifically American view of the relation between anthropology and art, written by Americans, sponsored, produced, and legitimated by American universities and disseminated by their associated presses. The editors ignore or seldom engage themselves with Non-American authors, except to brush them aside. Bourdieu's work on fields, the ascription of value and the competitive arenas of taste are hardly commented on; Marcus and Myers discuss the embeddedness of art and its economic and political integrations while ignoring the groundbreaking work of Canclini, Gimenez or Rossi: nor can their summary dismissal of the established anthropology of art (whatever that is) as being about the relation between art and aesthetics intended for a western audience, really be considered adequate to deny the interpretive conviction of such fine work as that of Witherspoon, Brett-Smith or Guss for example. Lastly, it seems equally disingenuous to criticise Boas,

for his reputed use of concepts of creativity and individuality reputedly borrowed from fine art discourse, as much as it is, to give other examples, to dismiss Thelma Sullivan, Cecilia Klein or Doris Heyden fine interpretations of pre-Columbian symbolic classifications and aesthetic categories, simply because they are on the wrong side of the fence. While, I would not want to denigrate the very real service that Marcus and Myers have performed for the anthropology of art, one cannot help but sometimes regret the polemical manner in which it has been cast.

Anthony Shelton

Departamento de Antropologia
Universidade de Coimbra
3000-056 Coimbra, Portugal
ashelton@antrop.uc.pt

Penny, H. Glenn. 2002. *Objects of culture: ethnology and ethnographic museums in imperial Germany*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press. 281 p. ISBN 0-8078-5430-1. £ 16.95.

Studies on the origins, growth and social and intellectual articulations of specific ethnographic museums are rare and Penny is to be congratulated on providing comparative case studies on the history of four such museums between 1868-1915. Penny's work does more than chart the history of Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Leipzig's ethnographic museums; it provides a useful palliative against the usual generalisations, resulting from a sole focus on the intellectual ideas behind them that see the post-Enlightenment museum as a development from curiosity to increasingly more orderly collections based on firm scientific principles and classifications. Neither does Penny ignore the political and economic arenas in which museums developed and matured or the different social groups that influenced them and sometimes drew alternative interpretations of their exhibitions than those intended by their directors and curators. The result is a complex mosaic of interweaving intellectual, social, political and economic relations that within five decades created the world's largest ethnographic collections, but failed miserably to subordinate them to the intellectual narratives they attempted to enunciate.

Penny begins by situating the origins of these museums in the rapidly growing cities of a newly founded German nation. The heirs to only scattered collections derived in Berlin and Munich from royal cabinets, or in the case