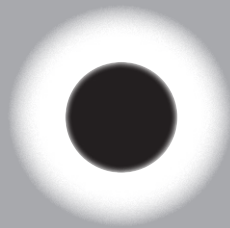


Focus Article





THINGING BEAUTY

ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE MAKING OF BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTY OF MAKING

Lambros Malafouris, Maria Danae Koukouti

Abstract

What does it mean to create a beautiful thing? What is *the beauty of making*? This paper explores the process of affective attunement by which selected aspects of the world come to matter to our senses and acquire aesthetic agency (the ability to move us). Aesthetic consciousness (experience and judgement) is the product of that process. It can be distinguished from other types of consciousness in that it embodies a special mode of immersive attention, what we call attentive material engagement. There are many varieties of aesthetic consciousness. Our concern in this paper is primarily with the creative variety associated with processes of making, or what in the context of ceramics and pottery making that provides the empirical basis of our investigation, can be described as a feeling of and for clay. Our approach to the study of the above processes is grounded in Material Engagement Theory (MET) which argues for a radical continuity between mind (cognition and affect) and material culture. We base our argument on our comparative anthropological study of aesthetic becoming in pottery making. What it means to experience and appreciate a line of clay in aesthetic terms? We are interested in the ways aesthetic consciousness manifests in the potter's entanglement with clay, as well as on how it emerges through specific processes of material engagement and forms of materiality. From such an anthropological perspective, the contextualization of aesthetic consciousness constitutes the condition sine qua non for its study. To build our argument, we review key insights from the anthropology of aesthetics and juxtapose them with current findings in neuroaesthetics, focusing specifically on embodied simulation theories. Is there a way we could bridge the distance between our neural ecologies and the material ecologies of our situated aesthetic practices? We propose that a deepened ecological-enactive conception of the aesthetic process that derives insights from participant observation and is concerned with the details of creative and attentive material engagement can prove beneficial for the design of new experimental research in situated and embedded aesthetics.

Keywords: Aesthetic consciousness, aesthetic misdirection, Material Engagement Theory, neuroaesthetics, pottery making, ceramics, attentive material engagement, situated aesthetic practices, anthropology, making.

AESTHETIC EXPRESSION: MAKING BEAUTY

This paper examines aesthetic consciousness (experience and judgement) during the process of making by hand. We ask *about the making of beauty by examining the beauty of making*. The material we will follow is clay. We base our analysis on insights derived from our comparative anthropological study of aesthetic becoming in pottery making (Fig. 1). We use the term aesthetic becoming to denote the processes of aestheticization¹ and affective attunement by which selected aspects of the world (not just artworks) come to matter to our senses and acquire aesthetic agency (the ability to move us) in a specific context. This process brings forth the aesthetic consciousness associated with those things and performances that we experience or describe as beautiful (usually because our engagement with them produces a pleasurable and positive feeling).

We can broadly distinguish between two modes of aesthetic consciousness, i.e., aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgement. The first refers to the pre-reflective sense of beauty and is associated primarily with the kinaesthetic dynamics of movement (see Sheets-Johnstone 2012) as these emerge in specific contexts of material engagement and in response to the affordances of specific materials (for the purpose of our analysis here that would be clay and the craft of ceramics). The second mode of aesthetic consciousness refers to the reflective or conceptual (narrative) valuation of an act or a thing as beautiful. The two forms of aesthetic consciousness are closely related (since the latter is always grounded on the former) but they also have important differences in that aesthetic beliefs and narratives may contradict the kinaesthetic dynamics (e.g. for the sake of improvisation).

Aesthetic consciousness can be distinguished from other types of consciousness in that it embodies a special mode of immersive attention, what we may call attentive material engagement that denotes active concern about specific phenomenal/aesthetic qualities (textures, forms, colours, sounds etc) that may otherwise, in other experiential contexts, pass unattended. Attentive material engagement can be active (as when we choose to pay attention to something) or passive (as when something captures our attention). The two processes are connected in a dialectical process and may change in time.

We should state at the outset that our concern, in this paper, with the above processes and categories is primarily anthropological. We

are not interested in the concept of aesthetics as an analytical category, from a philosophical theoretical perspective, and we are not seeking to discover where the essence of aesthetic consciousness lies. However, we do share an interest with the phenomenology of aesthetic experience (what is it like to like something). Moreover, together with philosophers and cognitive scientists we are seeking to explore questions such as: What it means to say of a material form that it is an aesthetic object? What is to sense and to feel (not just to see) beauty? What are the senses of beauty? Unfortunately, the way those questions and issues have been traditionally addressed, in the context of philosophical discourse, have limited value for anthropological analysis. This is mainly because mainstream aesthetic theory remains art-oriented (Western based), and often reiterates unhelpful abstractions, essentialisms and separations. Instead, we are interested in the ways aesthetic consciousness manifest in and emerge through specific processes of material engagement and forms of materiality. From such an anthropological perspective, the contextualization of aesthetic consciousness constitutes the condition sine qua non for its study. Our approach is nonessentialist and process-centred. Consequently, rather than identifying aesthetic consciousness with its objects, as in typical analytic philosophy, or use it to define and delimit some pure, detached, and autonomous realm of aesthetic contemplation, the approach taken here aims to ground aesthetic consciousness into the manifold interfaces of embodied material praxis. In contrast to a long Kantian tradition that argues for the autonomy of aesthetic consciousness we will argue that aesthetic consciousness is thoroughly situated and embedded. In particular, our approach is grounded in Material Engagement Theory (MET) which argues for a radical continuity between mind (cognition and affect) and material culture (Malafouris 2011; 2013; 2014; 2019; 2020). The term *thinging* is coined in the context of material engagement theory to denote the necessary unity of mind and matter. *Thinging* refers to the process of thinking and feeling *with*, and *through* (rather than simply *about*) things.

There are many varieties of aesthetic consciousness that should not be conflated. Our concern in this paper is primarily with the creative variety associated with processes of making, or what in the context of MET is referred to as creative *thinging* (Malafouris 2014; March 2019; Vallée-Tourangeau, March 2019). This process of creative material engagement encompasses the creation, perception, as well as our

emotional response and affective attunement with materials, forms or evocative performances. In the context of ceramics and pottery making that provides the empirical basis of our investigation, aesthetic consciousness is part of a broader process of developing a feeling of and for clay (Malafouris 2014; March 2019; 2020; Brinck, Reddy 2020). We call this process *thinging* beauty. *Thinging* beauty can be understood in two major senses. The first sense is the one we find in the context of making, when a person directly engages with a given material for creative or other pragmatic or semiotic concerns. In our example of pottery making *thinging* beauty refers to the potter's entanglement with clay. The second major sense, concerns the aesthetic becoming that happens to us, that is, to the observer (participant or not) of this act of making. We return to exemplify that later when we discuss the relationship between action experience and action observation in our discussion of embodied simulation.

Our argument will develop as follows: We begin summarising some key insights from the anthropology of aesthetics. Then we juxtapose them with current findings in experimental or neuroaesthetics focusing specifically on embodied simulation theories. At the second part of the paper we turn to our own findings in the context of pottery making. We end with some methodical considerations from a material engagement perspective. We argue that the anthropological study of aesthetic experience offers unique opportunities and a process-based methodological basis for phenomenological and post-phenomenological investigations (Gosden, Malafouris 2015; Ihde, Malafouris 2019).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

Notions of art and aesthetics have a long history of debate in archaeology and anthropology (Aubrun, 1999; Ingold 1996; Coote, Shelton 1992; Morphy 1992; 1994; 2007; 2009; Morphy, Perkins 2006; Banks, Zeitlyn 2015; Pink 2013). Initially, these debates tend to form around issues of style, dating, and typology. However, in recent decades, more interesting considerations, focusing on issues of agency, embodied experience, and materiality increasingly occupy the centre of attention (Gell 1996; 1998; Gosden 2001; Renfrew 2003; Knappett 2006; 2020). We want to highlight two central issues as especially relevant to our concerns in this paper. The first has to do with the question about the

universality and subjectivity of aesthetic experience. The second concerns the relationship between aesthetics and art.

We start with the first question: Is there such a thing as universal aesthetic value? It is widely accepted that different societies and cultures (past and present) live, transform, and participate in sensory environments they inherit or create, by engaging and building their material worlds. These material ecologies and forms of engagement in turn actively shape the ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Humans found themselves in this dialectic of agency and patency, constantly being moved, and actively moving, trying to make sense of the world. They do this by imposing sensory hierarchies privileging some senses over others, and by creating habitual bodily practices and aesthetic predispositions valuing certain qualities, forms or objects over others. This process can be described as an education of human perception (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2000; 2013; Gosden 2001). Certain things (in the broadest sense of the term) and sensory experiences are chosen and promoted over others (Gosden 2001, 166). For instance, vision is the sense mostly promoted in the Western world. This primacy of vision affects the way we appreciate objects as well as our relationship with the rest of our senses – touch, hearing, smell, etc. This prioritisation of vision is also reflected in the study of aesthetics where basic aspects of human aesthetic consciousness such as the tactile-kinaesthetic sense (Sheets-Johnstone 1999) has been neglected. By the same token, certain classes of visual representational objects, depictions and images are considered of special importance and aesthetic value and are labelled as «art», at least in the modern western world. But not all cultures emphasize the same senses or even have a category for the artistic object. They certainly lack the equivalent of Western pedestals and art-institutions. Our modern framing devices of aesthetic «distinction» are of limited use and applicability for measuring or defining human aesthetic experience. To understand the way people in different places appreciate the material world around them we must unlearn and put into scrutiny our own sensory education. One major insight that comes from the anthropological study of art is that none of the two categories, i.e., art or aesthetics, exist everywhere in the world or in the same way. At least, they do not exist in the same way as we are familiar in contemporary Western world. Yet, everywhere in the world people seem to be sharing ways to enjoy and comprehend the physical world and to put value on things according to their sensory impact – what we might call an aesthetic appreciation.

This brings us to the second question about whether the two notions of art and aesthetics should be disentangled. Interestingly, while anthropologists seem to agree that the notions of art and aesthetics should be kept apart, they disagree on which of the two notions could provide a valuable basis for anthropological analysis. To provide an overview of the major debate we will be contrasting two representative positions focusing on the works of Jeremy Coote and Alfred Gell.

Jeremy Coote (1992) suggests that the anthropological study of aesthetics has been disadvantaged by unwarranted focus on art and the art object. In Western societies aesthetic notions have been so closely associated with the study of art and debated in the discourse of the philosophy of art, that they become an obstacle to anthropological analysis. The anthropology of aesthetics, Coote argues, should instead focus its efforts exclusively on the comparative study of valued perceptual experience, as this manifest in different societies. Not every society has «art» – at least not in the «representational» or «institutional» sense familiar in the Western world. Still, every society has developed its own distinctive ways of seeing and sensing the world – Coote paraphrasing Michael Baxandall's «the period eye», refers to this as «the cultural eye»². Anthropologists should concern themselves with questions such as how do the people of a particular culture see the qualities of colour, form, shape, and proportion? How are these qualities recognised and expressed in aspects of everyday life, through language, skilled practices and rituals, as well as forms of material culture? The anthropological study of aesthetics needs to move beyond the Western preoccupation with the art-like, visual, and representational, in order to embrace the mundane, poetic, choreological, performative and praxeological manifestations of human aesthetic experience.

Coote's suggestions are not merely theoretical. His observations are primarily based on his study of the cattle keeping Nilotes of Southern Sudan (particularly on the Nuer, Atuot, Dinka, and Mandari). These are people with no tradition in the making of art objects but who, nonetheless, manifest remarkable aesthetic sensibilities concentrated particularly on their relationship with cattle. Coote wanted to examine how this peculiar aesthetic, rooted in cattle keeping, influenced the way the Nilotes of Southern Sudan understand and experience beauty. The shape of horns, bigness, and fatness, Coote writes, are of special interest, as is, of course, colour. A big, fat animal has special aesthetic value. The haunch bones should not be apparent,

while a large wobbly hump is much desired – the haunch is so much appreciated, particularly by the Nuer the Dinka and Atuot, that it is not uncommon for it to be manipulated shortly after birth to enhance and manage its future shape. As with the animal's humps, the Nilotes intervene with the shape of the horns. When the cattle move and shake their heads, the view of symmetrical and asymmetrical curves arching in the air is openly enjoyed and appreciated by the Nilotes of Africa. Colour is also of particular importance for the cattle-keepers. The black and white, as well as the red and white colouring are considered exceptional, as they provide a strong contrast. Such animals apparently stand out among the mostly pale grey cattle and are immediately visible in their environment. It should be pointed out that the Nilotes have developed a lengthy and various terminology to be able to describe colour and commend on it. Twenty-seven terms for colour exist among the Western Dinka, thirty for the Ngok Dinka, while for the Nuer several hundred colour variations have been recorded. The rich vocabulary allows for lengthy discussions on the colour of the cattle – the particular shades and permutations, colour patterns, contrast, etc. Coote argues that the Nilotes' visual perception of their surroundings is shaped by the colours of their animals and the complex terminology they have developed to speak about them. It is important to note that the Nilotic visual aesthetic can be traced in the way they act in the world. Young persons paint their faces with ash, imitating cattle marks³. Their clothes can resemble the black and white of cows and ornaments like necklaces often represent the shape of horns. In some dances young women imitate cows, performing movements close to their slow gallop. Coote also mentions instances of dances where both male and female dancers assume the role of cows, bulls and oxen.

We turn now from the Nilotic cattle aesthetic to the work of Alfred Gell (1985; 1992; 1998). As we saw, Coote's argument was all about the importance of adopting a situated aesthetic approach as a valuable means for the anthropological study of culture. Gell, on the contrary, focused his efforts on developing a new approach to the anthropology of art that will exclude all kind of aesthetic considerations. For Gell, art is not primarily about beauty or meaning⁴. Art is primarily about the production of social effects. Artworks do not possess aesthetic or semiological qualities, but an agency potential to be abducted. Gell adopts the term of abduction as the proper designation for the cognitive operation we «bring to bear on indexes». We

should note that Gell being concerned with indexes that «permit the abduction of “agency” and specifically social agency» uses this term in order to designate «a class of semiotic inferences which are, by definition, wholly distinct from the semiotic inferences we bring to bear on the understanding of language» (Gell 1998, 15). The art-object is not something that represents symbolic propositions but rather an index of agency and intentionality.

In his famous provocative article *The Technology of Enchantment*, Gell proposed that a kind of *methodological philistinism* is our only means to remove «the major stumbling-block in the path of the anthropology of art» (1992, 161). What he calls «methodological philistinism» is a turning of attention away from the aesthetic properties of the art work and towards its agency, within a nexus of social relations. Methodological philistinism denotes the detachment of anthropology from aestheticism which Gell sees as a requirement for the anthropological study of art: «an attitude of resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of works of art» (*ibidem*, 161). For Gell, the anthropology of art should not be concerned with aesthetics, but with «agency, intention, causation, result and transformation» (Gell 1998, 6). The efficacy of an art-work should be understood from a technological rather than aesthetic perspective – the «technology of enchantment» founded on «the enchantment of technology» (Gell 1992, 163). He illustrates that with the example the decorated canoes used in the kula exchange – a ceremonial trade of valuables, usually bracelets and necklaces, among the Trobrianders. According to Gell the Trobrianders placed decorated prow-boards on their canoes, curved with striking patterns and designs in order to induce to their trade partners a kind of an emotional disturbance. Upon watching the arrival of the Kula canoe the viewer on the shore should feel dazzled and perturbed, consequently mesmerised and manipulated to offer more valuable jewellery and shells during the exchange. The loss of the opponent’s self-control was the ultimate goal of the prow-board’s visual majesty. As Gell characteristically observes:

Neither the Trobrianders nor their exchange partners operate a category of «art» as such; from their point of view the efficacy of these boards stems from the powerful magical associations they have. A prow-board is an index of superior artistic agency, and it demoralizes the opposition because they cannot mentally encompass the process of its origination (Gell 1998, 71).

Indeed, in the context of Gell's argument, aesthetic value is replaced by the halo-effect of a «mind trap». The intricately carved Trobriand canoe prow is more of a psychological weapon than a formal aesthetic device. The function of the prow is to «bedazzle and beguile» *kula* exchange partners into handing over valuables cheaply and not the arousal of aesthetic emotion (Gell 1992). By the same token, the purpose of the design placed on the warrior's shield, is not to make it beautiful but fear-inducing (1998, 6). It is not there in order to be attended aesthetically, but to extend the agency of the warrior.

The question for us, given our purposes in this paper, is the following: is it really necessary to swallow Gell's «bitter pill» of «methodological philistinism»? Although we can easily see the value of Gell's theory of art and the benefits of a focus on agency, we think along with many anthropologists that the notion of aesthetics is too useful to throw out (see esp. Malafouris 2011; also Gosden 2001; Cotte 2002; Morphy 2009). When Alfred Gell in his *Art and Agency* (1998) shifts the focus of analysis from questions about meaning to questions of agency, i.e., «what does art do?», he seeks to provide a new anthropological measure of art that is detached from any aesthetic predispositions (specifically the Western understanding of beauty). What Gell rejects is the peculiar Western understanding of beauty and the inherent subjectivity and biased character of this enterprise:

I am far from convinced that every «culture» has a component of its ideational system which is comparable to our own «aesthetics». I think that the desire to see art of other cultures aesthetically tells us more about our own ideology and its quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans, than it does about these other cultures (Gell 1998, p. 3).

Yet this does not necessarily mean that aesthetics should be abandoned. Rather, a more productive move for an anthropology of aesthetic experience would be to place the question on a new situated ontological basis. What we seek after is a situated aesthetic approach that will give us the opportunity to explore alternative forms of aesthetic experience and ways of seeing. We believe Gell's attitude of methodological fetishism misconstrues the problem with aesthetics which, as seen in the context of material engagement theory can be expressed as follows: while for conventional aesthetic theory, things have agency only as aesthetic objects, i.e., objects designed to afford aesthetic experience, from an anthropological perspective things may

become aesthetic objects because they come to possess agency. To take his example of the Trobriand «prow-boards», what Gell failed to realise is that the capacity of the prow-board to operate as a psychological weapon in a given social matrix gives it also aesthetic «significance». Thus, the issue is not, as Gell proposes, to focus on the agency of this artefact instead of its aesthetic dimensions, but to identify the aesthetic dimensions that emanate precisely from the capacity of the canoe prow to operate as an agent in the social matrix of *kula* exchange. The key issue, in other words is not to abandon aesthetic considerations and focus on the agency of things, but instead, to recognize and account for the aesthetic of agency (Malafouris 2011). That is, to recognise that agential capacity and not just formal aesthetic qualities as traditionally conceived can be experienced as beautiful. We shall return to exemplify this point at the final part in our discussion of pottery making. First, we want to explore some links and tensions between our enactive anthropological approach and theories of embodied simulation as developed in the context of neuroaesthetics.

CONCERNING THE NEURAL CORRELATES OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

Neuroaesthetics broadly refers to the study of the neural bases of beauty by understanding the mechanisms underpinning the brain's response to art. The main objective has been to clarify the neural correlates associated with aesthetic experiences. Three major points of contrast with the previous anthropological insights are obvious: 1) Whereas there has been broad agreement among anthropologists that the study of aesthetics and the study of art should be kept separate, the quest for the neural underpinnings of aesthetic experience remains almost exclusively associated with representational artworks, primarily in response to visual art (esp. paintings). 2) Although, as one would have expected also from an anthropological perspective, there is great heterogeneity in the neuroscientific findings concerning the neural correlates associated with aesthetic experiences (e.g. appraisal and perception of beautiful stimuli), this discrepancy is usually accounted for by a lack of consensus on the definition of 'aesthetic experience'. In other words, the possibility that the empirical findings may instead support the case for aesthetic variability remains underexplored. This

brings us to the third point of contrast: 3) Reductionism. The greatest appeal and at the same time limitation of neuroaesthetic methods is that they often aim to reduce something as complex and dynamic as aesthetic experience or awareness to some aspect or mechanism of the beholder's brain.

Naturally, trying to understand the biological and neural basis of aesthetic experience, asking how aesthetic experiences are instantiated in the brain, and using our knowledge of brain mechanisms to inform our understanding of these experiences is undoubtedly a necessary step to the mentioned integration of brains, bodies, and things. In that sense, the contribution of neuroaesthetics is crucial in developing an anthropological situated understanding of aesthetic experience. A precondition for that, however, is that neuroaesthetics become more critical and contextualised. Any reductive neuro-centric tendency must be questioned. We want to make our position on that very important issue clear from the start: We would argue that neuroaesthetics should not be used or aim to explain aesthetic experience. The main objective of neuroaesthetic studies should be to help historical, philosophical, and anthropological disciplines to understand better the neural dimensions and significance of aesthetic experience and working together to provide better questions and explanations of that experience as a situated process. (see also Manzotti 2011; and more recently Gallese 2020). In short, aesthetic experience is not reducible to the human brain and thus it cannot be accounted for by whatever is happening inside that brain.

We are not saying that if we were to carry out an fMRI study using the mentioned cattle keeping Nilotes of Southern Sudan as subjects, in which their aesthetic preference for black and white colouring was investigated, we would not see some patterns of increased or decreased activation in brain areas we know to be associated with emotional valence or involved in reward-related processing. Instead, what we argue is that, in itself, this knowledge about the differential brain activation patterns observed, tells us nothing about the important role the Nilotic cattle plays in the social relationships (bridewealth, bloodwealth) of the Nilotes of Southern Sudan and about the ways these relationships shaped how they understand and experience beauty through their daily practices and skills of cattle keeping. The point we are trying to make here is not that an anthropological or social analysis of the Nilotic cattle keeping offers a better way to understand

how these people experience and understand beauty. What we argue is that to understand aesthetic consciousness you need to understand the cognitive ecology (Hutchins 2010) of the people involved. That is, you need to understand their situated practices of material engagement. To accomplish such an understanding we need a redistribution of epistemic labour, as well as some radical rethinking of deeply entrenched assumptions about what level of description matters as explanation of aesthetic consciousness both in anthropology and the cognitive sciences. This necessary integration of perspectives and methods is not easy. For one thing, it presupposes a non-reductive relational basis of analysis. Second, it demands careful choices about the kind of questions we ask and the unit of analyses we use in our investigations. What is exactly that an anthropologist seeks to understand by interviewing people about their aesthetic judgments and by observing and recording their kinaesthetic responses? What is exactly that a neuroscientist seeks to understand by scanning the brain to find the neural correlates of something they judged-beautiful versus judged-ugly? How one type of knowledge can interact with the other to help us advance with our big questions about the nature of human aesthetic consciousness? Experimental findings suggest that, at a basic level, our aesthetic judgments and preferences, likes and dislikes, are mediated, as one may expect, by our neural emotion centres, namely the insula and the amygdala (Di Dio & Gallese, 2009). But this seems commonplace from the perspective of anthropology. Returning to Coote's study of the Dinka we read that the cattle colour patterns fascinate and excite the Dinka to such a degree that it is often the centre of great dispute among them. Coote quotes Ryle: «When discussing the colour pattern of an animal – as they do for hours – the Dinka sound more like art critics than stock breeders. For instance, when does *mathiang* – dark brown – become *malual* – reddish brown? If the animal has brown patches, are they large enough to make it mading or are they the smaller mottling that identifies *malek*?»⁵. Apart from everyday discussions, the beautiful qualities of the animals are the themes of poems and songs. The aesthetic consciousness of the Nilotes is focused greatly on the colour of the cattle – its differences, its contrasts, its complexities. This passion infiltrates the Nilotes' perception of everyday life, their appreciation of their environment (the white of a cow resembling a full-moon) or indeed of their own skin: the bright white of an ivory bracelet on the black Nuer skin is compared with the white on the black of cattle.

And yet, this level of description, informative as it certainly is of the Dinka's affective experience and emotional response to cattle colour patterns, seems to be at a very different level of analysis from what the neuroscientist is describing when she argues for a «neural link» between aesthetics and emotion (Di Dio, Gallese 2009). To give another example, take for instance Gell's claim in relation to the concept of «captivation» (1998, 71). As he exemplifies, «captivation» arises from a cognitive «blockage», «the spectator becoming trapped within the index because the index embodies agency which is essentially undecipherable». Is this a process that could be «captured» with an fMRI?

As with any other aspect of human cognitive life and experience the brain is crucial but is only a part of the story. Our aim in this paper is not to provide a thorough review of the limitations and shortcomings of neuroaesthetics. Rather, we want to suggest some possible paths of interaction and collaboration. The easy solution is to evade the problem by simply admitting that the complexity of aesthetic experience makes it scientifically unquantifiable, an admission that renders the «neuroaesthetic» project questionable from an epistemological perspective. Still, the fact that some proponents of neuroaesthetics seem to reiterate the unwarranted neurocentric stance need not deter us from taking a more careful view on what neuroscience has to offer and on the value of understanding the neural correlates of aesthetic consciousness.

Is there a way we could bridge the distance between our neural ecologies and our situated aesthetic practices? Our proposal in this paper is for a material engagement approach focusing on creative aesthetic consciousness. To provide a more specific example of how one may proceed we will focus on one influential theory in the field of neuroaesthetics, that of embodied simulation, which draws upon the discovery of the mirror neuron mechanism, and use it to delineate a possible place where the anthropology, philosophy, and neuroscience of aesthetic consciousness could meet and engage into productive dialogue (see also Malafouris 2009; 2012; Malafouris, Renfrew 2008).

ON SIMULATIONS AND MIRROR NEURONS

Embodied simulation draws upon the discovery of the mirror neuron mechanism. David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese (2007) have been

applying neuroscientific research on mirror neurons into the study of art arguing that the aesthetic experience can be explained as a form of simulation involving the activation of canonical or mirror neurons operating largely below the level of consciousness. We should explain first that mirror neurons take their name from the fact that they activate both when we engage in action and when we observe the actions of others. Canonical neurons are specific neurons that activate both when we reach and grasp an object, or when we simply see the object. They have been very influential in discussions of social intelligence in that they provide an embodied mechanism for sensorimotor/kinaesthetic imitation by means of implicit mental simulations through which we are able to mentally re-enact, experience and thus understand the intentions or actions of others. One could easily see the relevance and influence of this capacity for empathy or kinaesthetic imitation in the context of aesthetic consciousness. However, we also suggest it would be wrong to reduce aesthetic experience to a kind of passive mental simulation (see also Gallagher 2011; Sheets-Johnstone 2012).

Let us take a closer look at the core argument. As Freedberg and Gallese (2007) suggest, looking at a picture, an object or a sculpture we often experience a sense of inward imitation/simulation (they call it «embodied empathetic feelings») of the observed actions and movements or of the actions and movements we associate with the objects depicted (p. 197). This embodied simulation mechanism is active both with respect to the «representational content of the works in terms of the actions, intentions, objects, emotions and sensations depicted in a given painting or sculpture», and «in terms of the visible traces of the artist's creative gestures, such as vigorous modeling in clay or paint, fast brushwork and signs of the movement of the hand more generally» (p. 199). The sense of bodily movement implied by the paint drippings of Jackson Pollock is a good example of the latter.

The major appeal of embodied simulation lies of course in the powerful way it brings movement and action at the very centre of aesthetic consciousness. One cannot emphasise enough the importance of developing action and movement oriented ontologies in the study of aesthetics. We notice, however, two possible concerns or problems: On the one hand, the experience of action does not answer the question of what differentiates or makes an action aesthetic or artistic. In other words, even if we take simulation theories at face value, we are left with no means to account for the difference between the experi-

ence enacted while observing Jackson Pollock's drip painting vs any other person's drip paintings. That applies both for the experience of the final product as objectified in the canvas and for the experience of the action itself (e.g. looking at the Jackson Pollock's film). Although neural simulations and activations certainly contribute to our bodily re-enactment of the material traces left on the canvas or on/in any other surface by the artist they tell us nothing about the question of art or about aesthetic experience per se. One reason for that is that embodied neural simulation cannot account for the situational affordances of the local environment. As Shaun Gallagher observes the hammer affords hammering and the landscape elicits movement; neither the image of a hammer or of a landscape can do any of that (2011, 102). Moreover, embodied simulation accounts cannot account for the temporal or the various semiotic dimensions of aesthetic action. We are not saying that neural simulation is not contributing in all the above dimensions. Our claim is that neural simulation cannot account for them.

This brings us to the second and related concern: If we accept kinaesthetic imitation and/or simulation produced by the physical traces as what constitutes aesthetic experience, it follows that every action is aesthetic action. This is not necessarily a problem, especially if one is willing to see aesthetics as an ordinary aspect of human experience and accept the dissociation between art and aesthetics that we suggested previously. In fact, embodied simulation may offer a useful link between the ecology of the brain and the ecology of movement and material engagement. Nonetheless, the embodied simulation account can be questioned when art is conflated with aesthetic experience. We are not questioning the active role of embodied simulation in the experience of action and movement, what we are questioning is the claim that embodied simulation is the primary, or the only mechanism for its constitution. The latter claim misrepresents the complexity of aesthetic consciousness as a distributed and interactive phenomenon⁶.

As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone observes in her critique of embodied simulation, the neural underpinnings of art appreciation «are themselves underpinned». The «making of all art is quintessentially contingent on movement» (2012, 385). As she writes:

To make «mechanisms» in the form of mirror neurons the «underpinnings» of visual art appreciation, the site of embodied simulations, is to reduce our response to both the form and content of visual works of art to particular neuronal firings in the brain. It is precisely to overlook the

«underpinnings» of those «underpinnings» in real-life tactile-kinesthetic experiences together with the invariants of human morphology that make those experiences possible (2012, 393).

In addition, one may adopt Gallagher's enactive interpretation of the mirror neuron mechanism and argue that action observation is not «a passive observational event» that merely elicits simulation but it involves an anticipatory understanding and preparation for response: «I perceive the other's action as something to which I can respond – a social affordance. This is enactive perception, which does not require that I put myself in the other person's shoes; it's perception for interaction – rather than simulation» (Gallagher 2011, 110-116).

At the same time, one may argue that the difference between everyday aesthetic consciousness (reflective and pre-reflective) and art-based aesthetic consciousness is that in the latter case the thing (performance, object or installation) invites aesthetic *thinging* by disrupting the temporality and by challenging one's habitual way of engaging the world. This does not mean that everyday aesthetic experience cannot be also challenging or disruptive. However, we do think with Shaun Gallagher that: «[T]o the extent that art suspends our habits of thought, it differentiates itself from our everyday encounters – with others or with worldly things. It reveals something different in a way that shakes and challenges our everyday attitudes» (2011, 110-116). Gallagher draws here partly on Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Cezanne's paintings and how these suspend human ordinary habits of thought and partly on Heidegger's understanding of art as revelatory of the possibilities and impossibilities of being-in-the-world. Moreover, he extends Husserl's phenomenological considerations on the importance of anticipatory kinaesthesia in the constitution and differentiation among the varieties of aesthetic consciousness. The main point here is that the kinaesthetic response would be different, precisely because the «I can» would be different. The case for the importance of the dynamics of kinaesthesia has been advanced with particular force in the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone:

[M]ovement underlies the creation and performance or exhibition of any art form. All such creations and their performances or exhibitions are dynamic in nature precisely because they emanate from movement: they are made from, or of, movement. Accordingly, a veritably enlightening conversation between art and science will be found not in a reductionism to the brain but in an exploration of dynamics inside and out, a natural,

engaged-in-the-world dynamics. Certainly, movement is difficult to study. Who in fact wants to study movement? It won't stay still! (2012, 399).

From the perspective of material engagement theory (Malafouris 2013; 2019; 2020; Malafouris, Koukouti 2016; 2018; Koukouti, Malafouris 2020) we want to extend this primacy of movement and tactile-kinesthetic experience further to incorporate the changing material ecology of our tactile-kinesthetic/affective bodies and their techniques.

POETICS OF CLAY

We stated at the start that our aim in this paper is to explore *the making of beauty by examining the beauty of making*. We said that in order to do so we are going to focus specifically on the process of pottery making and the craft of ceramics and offer some preliminary remarks based on our own anthropological observations on the beauty of clay in the context of the ERC HANDMADE project⁷. We also suggested that from an anthropological perspective aesthetic consciousness (what is sensed or thought of as beautiful or not) should not be prescribed either on *a priori* grounds or based on personal preconceptions and expectations. Our aesthetic judgement needs to temporally be suspended and give way to anthropological openness and attentiveness.

The craft of ceramics provides an excellent case study to explore those issues. On the one hand, the art of clay is multimodal and kinaesthetic. It brings together elements and skills from sculpting, drawing, and dancing. On the other hand, its long history and cross-cultural significance provides a fertile ground for developing new comparative perspectives bridging anthropology, cognitive archaeology and experimental aesthetics. This way the study of ceramics can highlight and help us to bypass some major obstacles in this field of research. We mentioned, for instance, the Western preoccupation with the visual which has often left other forms of art and dimensions of aesthetic experience unappreciated (e.g. haptic, kinetic, or performative). Although the making of visual art has long been recognised as a multisensory process, the emphasis on the final product meant that visual qualities are favoured over performative. This primacy of the visual is no longer the case with ceramics where aesthetic qualities of touch and movement (the kinaesthetic melodies of clay) come into play both at the stage of production

and at the stage of reception. In addition, we have the differentiation between art and aesthetics. All human activity has an aesthetic dimension. But it makes little sense to argue the same for what we call “art”. Thus, as we discussed, it is important that the two notions should be disentangled. Although art has been traditionally one of the major ways by which affective perceptual experience comes to matter, it is important that the study of aesthetics must be disconnected from the study of art. Pottery making is the kind of craft that retains the mundane aesthetic of material form, but at the same time, has a prominent role in the context of art. Last, we have the lingering question of what is universal and what is particular about aesthetic experience. We have said previously that beauty is a perspectival and situated construct and that it can be associated with the unfamiliar or dissonant as much as it can be the product of familiarity and perceptual kinship. Can we separate the aesthetic value of a given form, material or performance from its subjective aesthetic appraisal? Clearly, from the vantage point of anthropology, it will be a mistake to think about aesthetics in terms of objective criteria. There can be no universal criteria or principles of beauty. But can there be potential universal ways of feeling beauty? Even if the object of aesthetic experience is subjective and situated, aesthetic experience as a process is universal. A major question that the anthropological and philosophical study of aesthetics have in common concerns the tension between universality and subjectivity of aesthetic experience. We suggest that beauty is in the things we engage and experience, as much as it is *in the ways* we engage and experience them.

Look, for instance, at the clay lines we see depicted in Fig. 1 as they gradually emerge in between the potter’s hands and the clay on their way to become parts of a given form. Generally speaking, it is hard not to like them – not that it is impossible for someone to find clay unappealing or to find some of the lines more beautiful than the others (especially if that someone is the potter who creates them or another potter, or perhaps a person with sufficient knowledge and skills in pottery making). There is nothing objective or set about the aesthetic affordances of clay. The potter enactively discovers the limits and creative possibilities of the material based on his/her skills. Still, participating in the process of making a line of clay (both as an observer and as the maker) there is something about the way the material affordances of clay become entangled with the affordances of the potter’s hand that can be described without doubt as aesthetic.



FIG. 1. *Lines of clay.*

What makes these lines of clay beautiful? What it means to experience and appreciate a line of clay in aesthetic terms? Three qualities seem to be critical: a) there is a sense of value associated with the poetics of clay, that is with the way the depicted processes bring together the creative affordances of hands and clay; b) there is a sense of meaningfulness captured in those lines. This meaningfulness should not be understood in the symbolic or representational sense but more specifically, in the enactive sense of material signification. Not that the potters cannot speak of the beauty of those lines or use them to symbolise something else. Still, so far as *thinging* beauty and aesthetic consciousness is concerned, their meaning is performative or expressive (they mean through their indexicality or else as the traces of the potter's bodily movement, feeling, and material imagination); and last c) there is a combination of attentiveness and enactive or skilled intentionality (Reitveld, Kiverstein, 2014), what we may call *feeling of and for clay* (Malafouris 2014).

«THAT FEELING IN MY HANDS»

I see it [the beauty of an object] inside the clay as I squeeze it. There are periods where I squeeze the clay as hard as I can and it is still not enough. At other periods I barely touch the clay and yet I find the effect [of my touch] on the things that I make considerable and overbearing. I cannot even accept it... If I feel good as I am making something I know that other people will feel it as well. It is an almost metaphysical sensation. My pleasure and my desire are to make it [the clay object]. If my art will touch your aesthetic appreciation this is when the world becomes united. (*Interview with ceramist Kostas Karakitsos, Avramilia, Greece, 2018*).

I put things out of the oven and, let's say, one of them is faulty. The colour is all wrong. A long time ago I took out of the oven a piece that was much darker than the others. I was frustrated then, I thought it was damaged and I almost threw it away. And yet, it is the only one that I can remember now from that period. You see, it was unique, something special among things that looked the same. It is as if you have a lot of children that look alike and unexpectedly one stands out. I even tried to make other pieces imitate that accidental darker colour (*Interview with ceramist Kostas Karakitsos, Avramilia, Greece, 2018*).

I do not know if something is beautiful or not.... It is out of my hands. People walk into my shop and I see what objects they prefer to buy... There are moments when I make something when I feel that what I make is beautiful and I feel happy. Later on [in the process of making that same object] that feeling might be lost and I think to myself: 'it is ruined'. I become frustrated and sometimes I curse myself and the clay out loud. But then it comes back [the feeling that the object is beautiful] that feeling in my hands. (*Interview with ceramist Anthi Zisimopoulou, Kalavrita, Greece, 2020*).

That is, I make stripes which I pull up and I want the tactility of fingers to be apparent. That is, the process to be apparent. The one stripe which is with the other, I want this to be obvious. Not to hide. Not to try to beautify (smooth out) things. For a certain truth to exist in what I do. And, let's say, to be visible (that truth) in the result. (*Interview with ceramist Theodora Chorafa, Aegina, Greece, 2020*).

We single out these selected quotes from three of our participants because they seem to condense in a narrative form some recurrent observations on what it is to have an aesthetic experience during the process of making that stem from our ethnography. The first observation

concerns the process-centred character of aesthetic experience: most of the potters and ceramists involved in the HANDMADE project do not seem to associate the aesthetic qualities of their craft as much with the final object as with the form-making process. Another important related insight rising from our fieldwork concerns the temporal dynamics of aesthetic consciousness (experience and judgment). Beauty, within the context of the potter's aesthetic consciousness, is never used to describe something permanent and fixed. It is not seen as a formal pre-determined ideal to be achieved with the completion of a vase or a sculpture. It can be spoken of in terms of simple qualities like «symmetry», «complexity», «contrast», «proportion» and «balance» but it is never just that. You cannot create beauty by adding or imposing those elements in a given material form. The creative process is ongoing and incomplete and the aesthetic experience is following a similar dynamical trajectory. It cannot just be one thing. Instead, it constantly moves inside and outside the clay in ways that often cannot be set or controlled by the potter or anticipated by the viewer. While all the potters seem to agree on the subjectivity of the aesthetic judgement, there has been a lot of variation in their evaluation of what seems to be the main source or influences of their experiences. This unpredictability does not mean that the process of beatification is without constraints. As we said, beauty during the process of handmaking is not constant. It comes and goes. Sometimes, it can be felt, both by the potter and by the onlooker. Sometimes this feeling of beauty demands skills of sensing or of making that only some may have. Meanwhile, the objects or the lines created may be attended or abandoned in time. Beauty in the environment of a pottery workshop eludes human intention and agency, resulting mostly in a form of a struggle, a constant negotiation and collaboration with the material. During this process a potter's aesthetic experience is fickle and inconstant. It necessitates an endless re-configuration of initial ideas and designs and adjusts to the particular qualities of clay which not often, if ever, become realized in the same way twice (that is because a potter could never touch the clay in the exact same way twice). Thus, the classic question of «what is beauty», approached through the kinesthetic narratives of labour and the sensory experiences of our potters, gives way to a different challenge: that of answering «when and where is beauty»? Beauty no longer lies in the object. It is not the formal properties of the object that produces an aesthetic response. Rather, beauty is a participatory process, on a par

with other skills and forms of creative *thinging* (Malafouris 2014). It is the enhanced sensibility to the forming process, at the intersection of mind with matter, that produces aesthetic consciousness. This applies both to the maker and to the perceiver. It is this continuity of perception, cognition and action that we need to understand to do justice to the richness and complexity of aesthetic consciousness in craft but also in everyday life.

Trying to understand this continuity at the heart of aesthetic consciousness is a project where anthropology and neuroaesthetics could meet. The relationship between expertise and aesthetic experience is of special interest. In particular, recent experimental work in neuroaesthetics has offered clear indications that the observer's familiarity with a given material form or skill can profoundly shape how that form or skill is perceived and evaluated. For instance, several studies have sought to quantify the relationship between the observers' ability to physically perform or reproduce a dance movement and how much they liked watching that movement performed by professional ballet dancers (Cross *et al.* 2006; 2011; 2012; Cross 2015). One interesting finding has been that participants tended to like most those movements they perceived as difficult to perform themselves. In other words, the participant enjoyed more the movements they could not perform or physically re-enact. From an anthropological perspective, this finding is interesting because it can help us to rethink the basis of Gell's theory of art as a technology of enchantment (1992). In particular, one may argue that the «enchantment» emanates from an experienced discrepancy between our bodily/neural attempt to simulate the perceived movements by engaging sensorimotor areas (embodied simulation) and the ability of our body/brain to actually do so through existing motor training or previous experience. In short, the body is lacking the necessary skill to imitate/recreate what is being observed due to the difficulty or complexity of the perceived movement. This resonates with Gell's suggestion of perceptual confusion that produces a halo effect due to the inability of the perceiver to recreate the origin of the process involved. This could explain also why receiving training in some craft (or any skill) usually increases the participants' aesthetic appreciation of that craft or skill (Ticini *et al.*, 2015).

Moreover, returning to the specifics of pottery making, such a skilled based approach to embodied simulation can help us understand why the aesthetic consciousness of the participant observer is

often very different from that of the potter who creates. The participants' bodies lack the necessary skills (perceptual or technical) to follow, and thus, simulate or anticipate the potter's movements and the temporal dynamics of enactive discovery. An unintended implication of that is that we (the observers) often take pleasure at the wrong, or simply at different, parts of the forming process than the potter does. We may look at the base of a vase when beauty is at the shoulders, or get absorbed by colour when all that matters is texture. The latter point is crucial because it implies that embodied simulation may distract aesthetic perception capturing attention in superficial, surface movements which have no aesthetic significance. This can blind us to the hidden qualities of clay that really matter to understanding the meaning of aesthetic appreciation in situated action. The texture and plasticity of clay offer a good example of that, where the delight most people experience from observing motion and flow often distract from sensing resistance, temporality, and fragility of the material. The point to emphasise here is not just that skill matters into how a given form or line will be experienced aesthetically. More important to emphasise is that because skills are not always visible, or in any case do not always manifest in an obvious or explicit sense (for instance like symmetry does), there is good chance that they will not be recognised or that they will be subdued by other more expressive or somatic modes of attention. This form of aesthetic *misdirection* should be taken into consideration with respect to simulation theories. We are not trying to undermine the aesthetic agency of clay as a material. On the contrary, we are trying to underline the expressive potential of this material not as a surface property but as a mode of creative and aesthetic becoming. This mode of becoming is sensed by the potters as part of their creative aesthetic consciousness but is usually not accessible to the external observer who is lacking the necessary skills or ways of sensing, seeing and feeling for clay. Take for instance the handmade lines of clay we saw in the previous section depicted in Fig. 1. In a very basic sense all handmade lines are indexes of the hand's motion. This is what makes lines powerful agents of aesthetic experience: we are moved by the movement they signify and materialise (see also Malafouris 2021). However, discerning the amount of care and skill that goes into their making is all together a very different process. No doubt, a line may express somehow the affective states of its creator. However, although a line may embody something of the rhythm and flow of the potter's

imagination, it can also hide it. It could stress but also condense time. We could argue then that a line makes aesthetic sense only if it is experienced in the right way and at the right time. Obviously, there will be multiple right ways and times to see the beauty of line but this multiplicity is not entirely subjective or without aesthetic logic and material constraints.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Much of what is traditionally discussed and debated about aesthetics, both in philosophy, anthropology, and cognitive science, comes down to our ways of seeing, and more broadly of sensing a given process, form, or performance. But our ways of seeing, touching and sensing the world are situated. They cannot be taken for granted, rather, they need to be understood. This primacy of material engagement in human consciousness implies that what we experience and what we sense partly depends on our learned abilities and skills. A consequence of that is that aesthetic consciousness (experience and judgement) will be conditioned from those abilities and skills. More simply, we do not sense the beauty of a clay vase or a line in the same way we sense the vase or the line as objects. Feeling beauty in craft is a multimodal capacity of making sense by means of attentive material engagement that demands deepened and enriched appreciation of the process of making, or else, it demands *thinging* beauty. You cannot see or feel the beauty of clay without some understanding of the process of transformation and the techniques of making. What is to be appreciated or valued aesthetically, the source of our pleasure, is not always visible to the untrained hand or eye, not even available in perception. It is not enough to see colour or touch the outline of shape or the texture of a surface. We need to make sense of movement and process. We are not referring only to movement of the parts that explicitly move but most importantly of the parts that may seem static: we are calling for a process-archaeology of clay (Gosden, Malafouris 2015). We are not implying any kind of traditional «autonomy», «purity» or «transcendence» of aesthetic sensibility. Quite the contrary, we argue for the «situatedness», «impurity», and «embeddedness» of aesthetics in material engagement. Aesthetic experience can be described as a form of «skilled contamination» and «contagion» that is based on the exchange and circulation of a variety of traits and features that are inseparably men-

tal and physical. Thus, a deepened ecological-enactive conception of the aesthetic process that derives insights from participant observation concerned with the details of creative and attentive material engagement, can prove beneficial for the design of new experimental research on aesthetic experience.

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Lambros Malafouris
 Institute of Archaeology
 University of Oxford
 36 Beaumont Str
 Oxford OX1 2PG
 lambros.malafouris@arch.ox.ac.uk
 Maria Danae Koukouti
 School of Archaeology
 University of Oxford
 36 Beaumont Street
 Oxford OX1 2PG
 maria-danae.koukouti@arch.ox.ac.uk

ENDNOTES

¹ Aestheticization can also have a negative meaning as harmful and superficial (e.g. in the context of advertising) but for reasons of space we are not going to discuss that.

² M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972.

³ Coote referring to J. Buxton, *Religion and Healing in Mandari*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 401.

⁴ «I do not deny that works of art are sometimes intended and received as objects of aesthetic appreciation, and that it is sometimes the case that works of art function semiotically, but I specifically reject the notion that they always do» (Gell 1998, p. 66).

⁵ J. Ryle, *Warriors of the White Nile: The Dinka*, Amsterdam, Time-Life, cited in Coote, 1992, p. 250.

⁶ John Lutterbie nicely illustrates this problem of the disregard or intentional neglect for the complexity of human aesthetic experience using G. Gabrielle Starr's di-

discussion of Gian Bernini's Apollo and Daphne in *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience* (2013) (Lutterbie 2017).

⁷ <https://handmade.web.ox.ac.uk/home>.

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