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ALFRED GELL

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CHAPTER 6

VOGEL'S NET

TRAPS AS ARTWORKS AND ARTWORKS AS TRAPS

A good deal of discussion in the philosophy of art, visual art particularly, at the present time, has to do with the problem of defining the idea of an 'artwork'. When is a fabricated object a 'work of art' and when is it something less dignified, a mere 'artefact'? There are (at least) three possible answers to this question. It may be said that a work of art can be defined as any object that is aesthetically superior, having certain qualities of visual appealingness or beauty. These qualities must have been put there intentionally by an artist, because artists are skilled in activating a capacity present in all human beings, that is, the capacity to respond aesthetically to something. This theory is not one I propose to discuss here, although it is still widely held, especially by the general public, who tend to think that visual attractiveness, or beauty, is something they can recognize automatically.

The second theory holds that artworks are not, as the 'aesthetic' theory holds, distinguished by any external quality. A work of art may not be at all 'beautiful' or even interesting to look at, but it will be a work of art if it is interpreted in the light of a system of ideas that is founded within an art-historical tradition. Call this the 'interpretive' theory. The great critical merit of the interpretive theory over the 'aesthetic' theory is that it is much more attuned to the realities of the present-day art world, which has long abandoned the making of 'beautiful'-looking pictures and sculptures in favour of 'concept' art, for example, of the exhibition of gallery assemblages like Damien Hirst's dead shark in a tank of formaldehyde (Fig. 6.1, to be discussed later) – not an object that could be called appealing, nor a work of any excellence in terms of craftsmanship. But Hirst's shark is a highly intelligible gesture in terms of contemporary art-making, not a stunt or a symptom of insanity. It is

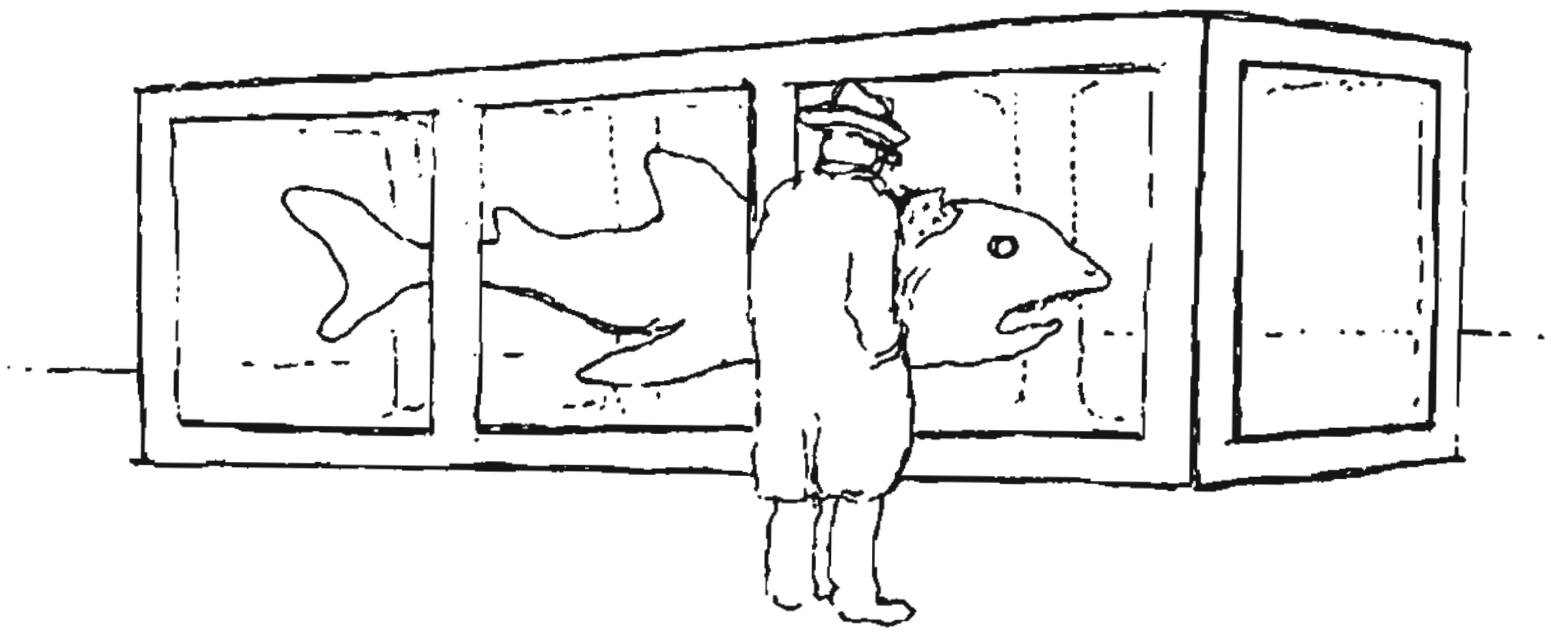

Figure 6.1 Damien Hirst's shark: *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1992

a work thoroughly grounded in the post-Duchampian tradition of 'concept' art and, as such, is capable of being evaluated as good art, bad art, middling art, but definitely art of some kind. Proponents of the 'aesthetic' theory have difficulties with this kind of work, to say the least, and may be inclined to deny that it is art at all, but in that case they may be accused by critics and artists, rightly to my way of thinking, of reactionary tendencies.

Finally, there is a more radical version of the 'interpretation', theory, which provides the third possible answer to the question 'what is an artwork?'. This theory, known as the 'institutional' theory, claims, like the 'interpretive' theory, that there is no quality in the art object, as material vehicle, that definitively qualifies it to be, or not be, an artwork. Whether it is or not is dependent on whether or not it is taken to be one by an art world, that is, a collectivity interested in making, sharing and debating critical judgements of this type. The difference between the interpretive theory and the institutional theory is that the institutional theory does not presuppose the historical coherence of interpretations. A work may be in origin unconnected with the mainstream of art history, but if the art world co-opts the work, and circulates it as art, then it *is* art, because it is the living representatives of this art world, namely artists, critics, dealers and collectors, who have the power to decide these matters, not 'history'. This view is the one put forward by a noted American philosopher of aesthetics, George Dickie (1974; 1984). It is a theory that does not seem to have the support of anything like a majority of Dickie's philosophical colleagues, but that is perhaps, because it is a sociological theory rather than a truly philosophical one – a theory about what is (really) considered art, rather than what ought

(rationally) to be considered art. But the objectionableness of Dickie's theory from the standpoint of traditional aesthetics is precisely what constitutes its appeal to the anthropologist, since it bypasses aesthetics entirely in favour of a sociological analysis much of the kind this discipline would provide anyway (Bourdieu 1984). None the less, the merits of the 'institutional' theory of art as a contribution to philosophical aesthetics must be assessed independently of its usefulness as a starting point for sociological study of the art world.

The points at issue between these various theories were brought very much into focus at an exhibition, 'ART/ARTIFACT', mounted at the Center for African Art, New York, in 1988, under the direction of the anthropologist Susan Vogel. (I never saw this exhibition, but it received a detailed review in *Current Anthropology* outlining its contents and layout; see Faris [1988], who makes certain critical comments that I take up later.) The first exhibition space was entitled 'The Contemporary Art Gallery' (whitewashed walls, spotlights) and the star item on display was a striking object (Fig. 6.2) – a Zande hunting net, tightly rolled and bound for transport. Susan Vogel presumably displayed this item in this way because New York gallery-visitors would be spontaneously able to associate this 'artefact' with the type of artwork that they would have looked at in other

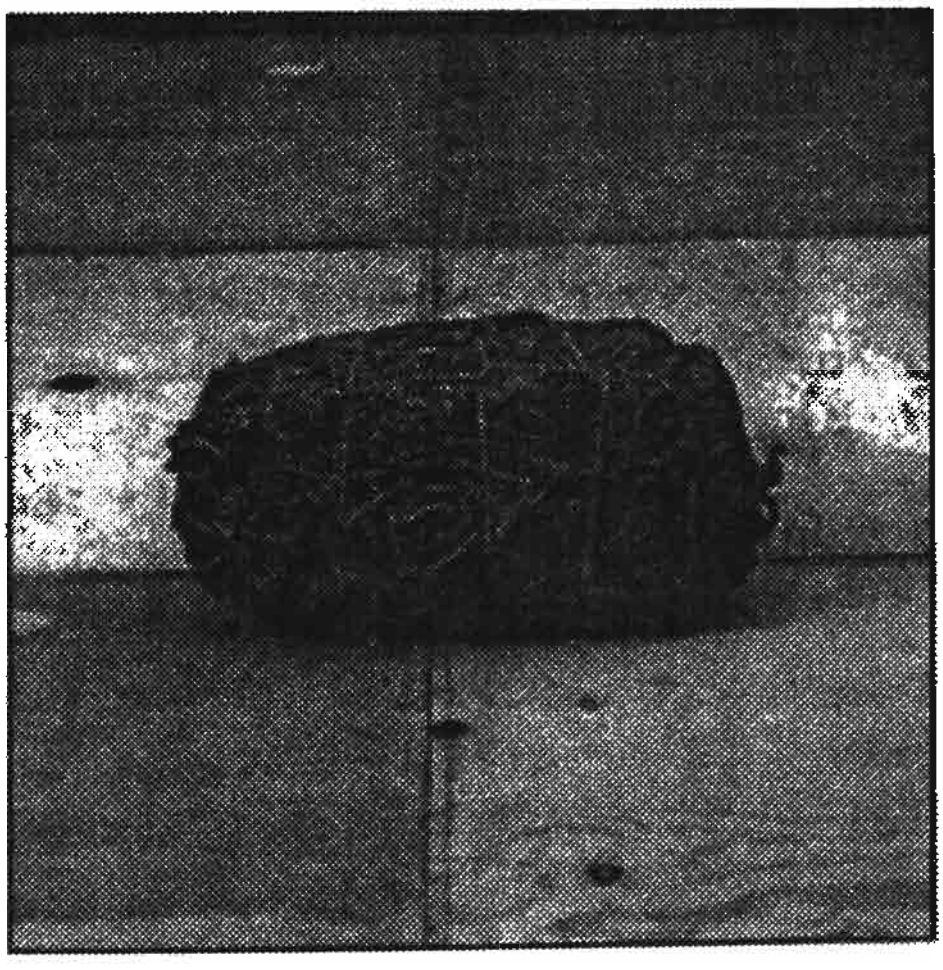

Figure 6.2 Zande hunting net, bound up for transport (central Africa)
Source: By courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History (negative no. 3444(2)). Photo J.L. Thompson

galleries, or at least seen illustrated in newspapers and magazines. (The closest immediate analogy is with the string-bound sculptures of Jackie Windsor, see Fig. 6.3. Faris [1988: 776] mentions Nancy Graves and Eva Hesse as further parallels.) Vogel's choice of this particular item was a curatorial masterstroke, for which she deserves much praise, and the 'net' provoked an equally masterly catalogue essay by the American critic and philosopher of art, Arthur Danto (1988), which was published in the exhibition catalogue. What Vogel wanted to do was to break the link between African art and modern art 'Primitivism' (the Picasso of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, pseudo-African masks by Modigliani, Brancusi, etc.) and suggest instead that African objects were worthy of study in a more expanded perspective, including the dominant art style in New York in the 1980s, that is, concept art, represented by the likes of Jackie Windsor and others. Vogel's catalogue essayist, Danto, had reasons for wishing to resist this move, inasmuch as he was not persuaded that the hunting net was, or could ever become, art. 'Institutionally' speaking, the net had indeed become art in the sense that it had been exhibited as such by Vogel, and we may be sure it was received as such by a significant, and very gallery-educated, segment of the visiting public. I would hazard that had Dickie, rather than Danto, written the catalogue essay, the 'net' would have been celebrated precisely as an instance of the way in which an art world creates its artworks by labelling them as such. But Danto, on the other hand, devoted his essay to proving that the 'net's' affinities with contemporary concept art were only superficial.

In this essay I want to do two things: first, to consider Danto's

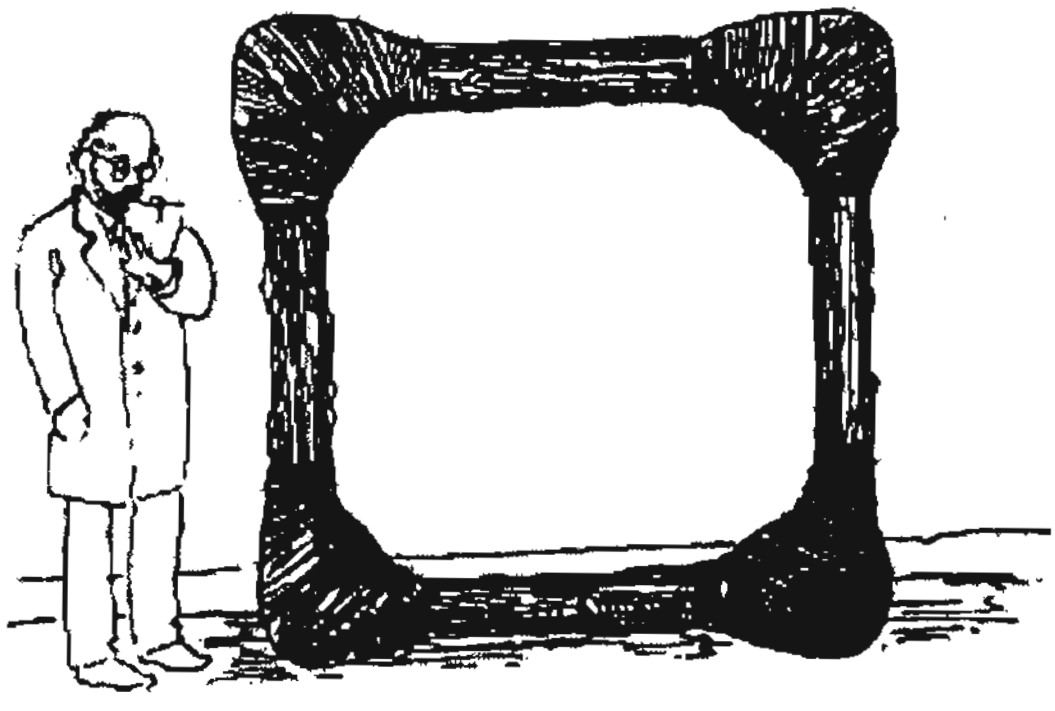

Figure 6.3 *Bound Square* by Jackie Windsor, 1972

proposed distinction between 'artefacts' and true works of art; and, second, to mount a little exhibition of my own (unfortunately consisting only of text and illustrations) of objects that Danto would consider artefacts but which I consider candidates for circulation as works of art, even if they were not intended to be 'works of art' by their originators, who indeed probably lacked this concept altogether. If I persuade my public, and if the institutional theory is true, that is, art is what I and enough like-minded people say it is, then a new category of art objects is about to be born. Or not, as the case may be. . . . And especially not according to Danto, to whose arguments I must now turn.

Danto is responsible for both the interpretive and institutional theories of art, in that it was he, originally, who introduced the expression 'art-world' into philosophical aesthetics (Danto 1964). But whereas Dickie (1974) developed Danto's ideas in the sociological direction outlined above, so that being a 'work of art' becomes a matter of social consensus among the art public, Danto tends towards a more idealist view of art, with many explicit references to Hegel in his later work. Danto's position is that art objects are such by virtue of their interpretation, and that interpretation is historically grounded. He has written two very important and well-received studies on the philosophy of modern art along these lines (1981; 1986). I agree with Danto's output in many, probably most, respects; but I am forced to say that the weaker points in Danto's version of interpretive theory emerge rather visibly in the anthropological, cross-cultural context of his 'ART/ARTIFACT' essay.

According to Danto, there are no characteristics that an object can have which make that object a work of art; the 'objective' difference between a real Brillo box and a mock Brillo box by Warhol is not what is responsible for the fact that only the latter is a work of art. Indistinguishably similar objects could be differentiated such that one would be an artwork and the other not. (This is exhaustively discussed in Danto 1981.) But there is a big difference between the kind of interpretation, context, symbolic significance, and so on, that an object must have if it is to be an artwork, compared to that attached to a non-artwork or 'mere' artefact. The interpretation must relate to a tradition of art-making that has internalized, reflects on and develops from its own history, as western art has done since Vasari, and maybe before. According to Danto (and I am entirely persuaded by this), modern 'concept' art corresponds to the total

take-over of the 'image-making' side of art by the 'reflecting on history' side of art: concept art is the final convergence of art-making, art history, art philosophy and art criticism in a single package. However, the key concept here is the notion of a progressive, cumulative tradition (*Geist*, spirit, etc.). What is Danto to do when New York gallery-goers seem to want to enthuse over a hunting net as if it was the latest production of *Geist* in the person of Jackie Windsor or her ilk? Can contemporary art swallow extraneous objects in this way? Is the absence of an identifiable maker, and any recognizable 'artistic' intention on his or her part, an obstacle? Danto cannot but assume a critical position because intention, meaning and groundedness in a discrete, self-reflexive tradition is essential to his understanding of contemporary art, and indeed all western post-Renaissance art. The Zande hunter who made or commissioned the net did not participate in the historic frame of reference to which Windsors similiar-looking work refers, so the analogy between them is misleading. Nor could it be alternatively argued (Danto does not even consider this possibility) that the 'artist' here is Vogel, who is presenting the 'net' as a 'ready-made' in the tradition of such Duchamp prototypes as the shovel, coat rack, urinal, and so on, because Vogel is not presenting herself as a second Duchamp, but as a museum curator, offering us something to admire made in Africa, by an anonymous 'artist' who is certainly not Vogel herself.

Danto's dilemma is, essentially, that his interpretive theory of art is constructed within the implicit historical frame of western art, as was its Hegelian prototype. If he says that nothing that comes from without the historical stream of western art (which is certainly a broad stream) is 'art' in his sense, then he is certainly open to an unwelcome charge of Euro-centricity; but if he admits that exotic objects that do not participate in the *Geist* of western art are nonetheless art, how is he to exclude the 'net'? And if he allows the 'net' to be included, what is left of the explanatory value of the historically grounded interpretation, and the art/artefact distinction that is founded on it? The philosopher is truly ensnared in Vogel's net, fulfilling, at long last, its function, if not in the originally intended way.

There is only one way out for the idealist under these circumstances; he must assume that there are underlying interpretive or symbolic affinities between all true works of art in all traditions. The Zande net is to be excluded in Zande terms, because in Zande culture, as in all possible cultures, art objects have to have a particular

type of symbolic significance, which a mere hunting net could safely be assumed to be lacking. Having been excluded (presumptively) by the Zande, it cannot be included by the New Yorkers, because to do so is to contradict their own principle of 'no interpretation – no art'; having agreed that not just any Brillo box but only a Warhol Brillo box is 'art', they have to accept that this net, in Zande terms, is no Warhol, but just any old net.

But how to specify the basis of the affinity between (qualifying) African artworks and western artworks, and the non-affinity between the Zande net and either of these? Danto argues that 'great' African sculpture was recognized as on a par with Donatello, Thorwaldsen, and so on, by a process of 'discovery' that he likens to scientific discovery, carried out by Picasso, Brancusi, Roger Fry and their contemporaries; this greatness was always there but had been obscured by prejudicial canons of taste associated with colonialism. But this kind of African art was produced, it is implied, by individual, highly talented and discriminating sculptors, who had specific artistic (aesthetic) intentions that they carried through in their work, which ultimately became accessible to the non-African public via the efforts of sympathetic westerners. However, this approach to the incorporation of African art into the Danto scheme of things carries with it a certain risk of aestheticism – and is not Danto the one responsible for telling us that what makes art art, is not any external (aesthetic) characteristic it may possess? So Danto is obliged to change tack, and consider an instance in which there might be African 'art' that would not be obviously different, in any external or visible respect, from African non-art, a stipulation not applicable to famous examples of African sculptural art, whose art-object status is never in doubt, for Danto at least.

Danto is a philosopher, so he does not take the obvious course of turning to the tomes upon tomes that have been written on material culture in Africa – instead he obeys his disciplinary imperative and indulges in a *Gedankexperiment*, in which he happens to be a particularly skilled practitioner. He imagines that there are two related, contiguous, but historically divergent African tribes, whom he names the Pot People and the Basket Folk, respectively. To outward observation the material productions of these two tribes, which include both pots and baskets, are pretty much identical. But the Pot People revere Pot makers, who are their priests and wise men, and the making of pots is a sacred activity that recapitulates cosmogeny, since God was a potter who formed the earth out of mud. The Pot People

also make baskets, for utilitarian purposes, but they do not regard basket-making as a particularly noble activity. On the other side of the hill, among the Basket Folk, things are otherwise; here God was a basket-maker who wove the world from grass, and it is pots that are considered merely utilitarian. So here the basket-makers are the wise men of the tribe and the potters are mere technical specialists, artisans.

Danto maintains that even if only the most minute examination enables the museum experts to distinguish the pots and baskets of the Pot People from the pots and baskets of the Basket Folk, the difference in the spirit in which potting is engaged in among the Pot People is sufficient to ensure that their pots are works of art, as opposed to the Basket Folk's pots, which are not (and vice versa for their respective baskets). The pots of the Pot People and the baskets of the Basket Folk belong in the prestigious *Kunsthistorisches Museum*; the baskets of the Pot People and the pots of the Basket Folk in a quite different collection, the *Naturhistorisches Museum*. The works in the Art History Museum emanate from Absolute Spirit, they are vehicles of complete ideas, stemming from, and illuminating, the human condition in its full historic density and fatefulness, whereas the objects in the Natural History Museum are means towards ends, implements that help human beings to live out their material lives – they are, in another Hegelian expression, only part of 'the Prose of the World'.

Danto, by implication, excludes the hunter's net on the grounds that it is 'prose' in object form, and it will be seen that he draws a particularly sharp distinction, on the basis of his thought-experiment, between art objects and artefacts. But, as with all such experiments, one is entitled to ask whether it is realistic. Anthropology ought to be able to pronounce on these matters, since Danto's experiment is clearly meant to evoke real ethnography as the prototype for useful expository fictions. According to Faris, in his review of the exhibition, anthropology is only too willing to oblige with copious corroborating instances of wise men uttering Dantoesque things – and that is the problem. He roundly denounces Danto's piece for promoting tainted orthodoxy, both art-historical and anthropological. Modernists like Danto are

> paralysed by the acceptance of all cultural tyrannies and the consequent blindness to specific tyrannies [so that] they frequently fall into the most banal of humanist sentiment and idle gush

> about expressive and emotive power. . . . [T]hey do so largely in acceptance of the anthropological enterprise – the notion that, for example, African objects cannot be fully understood without indigenous Africans in the specific cultural setting that produced them. . . . Danto might agree, and while it is trivially true that context is relevant to meaning, it cannot be accorded axiomatic value, particularly as such context and such meaning have been structured by anthropology.
>
> (Faris 1988: 778)

Faris argues that this kind of liberalism ostensibly receives the productions of the ethnographic Other on the Other's terms, but in fact only does so if the Other comes up with something acceptable – consistent with an existing concept of Absolute Spirit, perhaps. Danto's imaginary ethnographies of Pot- and Basket-cosmogeny reveal exactly what kind of anthropological story-telling he would find congenial, but in reality anthropologists and indeed their informants have never been slow in providing just this sort of thing. Faris's Foucauldian point is that the whole anthropological enterprise is slanted towards finding the sort of wise men Danto endows with the power to distinguish between art and non-art, because we want to pin these objects down and attribute to them fixed, controllable meanings. I agree with Faris that Danto's (fictional) wise men are palpably projections of authority, and that they deserve to be unmasked. But unfortunately Faris does not really grapple with the 'art object' vs. 'artefact' distinction, except to indicate that it is subject to continuous redefinition (cf. Clifford 1988: 224) and can be hardly disentangled from issues of ideology and power.

Danto himself has more to say on the subject than simply that wise men can provide the interpretations that make true artworks fragments of Absolute Spirit. In the second half of his essay he dwells on the idea that artefacts are 'incomplete' whereas artworks embody complete, self-sufficient ideas. Citing Heidegger, he remarks that an artefact is always part of a *Zeugganzes* – a system of tools, a technical system forming a whole. There cannot be a hammer by itself; a hammer implies nails to be hammered, wood to hammer them into, saws to shape the wood, and so forth. The net (implicitly) is only a component of the Zande hunting *Zeugganzes*, and has no meaning in itself. However finely crafted, an object like a net, a hammer, or even a very decorative door-hasp or other example of applied art, is incapable of conveying the kind of idea

that distinguishes the art object, which always addresses the universal:

> It would be baffling were someone to say such things [pertaining to universal truths] about knives or nets or hairpins, objects whose meaning is exhausted in their utility. Universality belongs after all to thoughts or propositions, and no one would have supposed that knives or nets or hairpins express universal content. They are what they are used for, but artworks have some higher role, putting us in touch with higher realities: they are defined through the possession of meaning. They are to be explained through what they express. Before the work of art we are in the presence of something we can grasp only through it, much as only through the medium of bodily actions we have access to the mind of another person.
>
> (Danto 1988: 31)

But even Danto is forced to qualify this, since it is obviously the case that the bulk of the art comprising the western art tradition was not produced to be appreciated by an art public, but to fulfil instrumental purposes. Religious pictures serve liturgical functions (as altarpieces, aids to piety), portraits convey likenesses, statues dignify public spaces and glorify rulers, and so forth. The same is even more glaringly true of African products of the kind Danto is prepared to concede artwork status to; not one of them was made to be admired as an independent artwork rather than as an adjunct to public ceremony – ceremonies that cannot be exported when the artworks are exported. In short, not just nets but things like African masks are part of *Zeugganzes*, too. Danto deals with this problem by admitting that

> until very recent times [and even now, presumably, in Africa] artworks enjoyed double identities, both as objects of use and praxis, and as vessels of spirit and meaning. African art, once exported, loses its former functions, but retains its latter ones. One does not want to make placelessness one of the defining attributes of art, because that would disenfranchise as art the artworks of Primitive cultures. In their own societies these works have a place, but it would not be the *kind* of place they have in the *Zeugganzes*, in their dimensions as tools in system of tools. The important point is that the whole practical life of those societies could go forward if the

> society had in fact no works of art . . . granted that works of art play roles in ritual that are believed to have practical efficacy.
> (Danto 1988: 29)

This is surely a puzzling statement, even for a philosopher. Danto wishes to say that artworks have meaning apart from their use, and in so far as they are art they are not useful but meaningful. The self-same objects do have uses, though, in rituals of presumed efficacy. Now we could subtract the artworks and 'practical life' would still be able to continue, minus artworks, because the self-same objects, in their guise as tools or artefacts, would still be there to fulfil their previous extra-artistic functions. This is surely casuistry. How could African masks be deployed in a ritual context as instruments of efficacy and not simultaneously have whatever cultural-interpretative significance they would have to have, according to Danto's own theory, to qualify as artworks? The proposed separation between instrumentality and spirituality is not feasible. And if artworks are implements of a kind (which would not I think be disputed by African carvers) then is it not also conceivable that implements might also be artworks of a kind?

When you come down to it, the reason that Danto excludes the 'net' as art is that he cannot imagine a wise man who might be able to tell him a tale sufficiently compelling to induce him to think otherwise; he assumes that because it is a net, and nets are used for hunting, and hunting is a means of obtaining food, ergo, the net is a mere tool, like a cheese-grater. In this he reveals lack of familiarity with African ethnography where most of the hunting is described as taking place either as part of specific rituals (initiations, annual festivals, etc.) or at the very least in a highly ritualized manner, certainly not as a routine means of obtaining the staff of life. So had the 'net' been properly documented at the time of its collection (*c.* 1910) it is most likely that it would have figured ritually as an attribute of the 'hunter' role in the collective drama of the ritual hunt – or at least one cannot exclude this possibility – in which case it would be functioning in a way not too different from any other item of ritual paraphernalia, such as a mask.

Meanwhile, one is able to know that wise men in Africa are prepared to tell stories to anthropologists that reveal not only that hunting is ritually important (as a source of augury, an ordeal for the youth, and so on) but that the means of hunting, namely, nets, or in this case, traps, are metaphysically significant. The source I use here

is Boyer's (1988) account of wise men, chanters of magical epics, *mvet*, among the Fang of West Africa. Boyer is explicitly trying to understand the nature of 'traditional' wisdom, and in the course of his enquiries he comes to know a certain expert chanter, Ze, with whom he holds long discussions on the nature of wisdom:

> Like wild animals, and like *evur* (wisdom/magical power), *mvet* (epic) is a thing of the forest, in that it is evanescent; you think you can get hold of it, but it escapes, and it is you who gets caught. It was with Ze that I pointed out that at a certain point the complexities of *mvet* were often being compared to traps. In response, he told me the following story:
>
> 'In my youth I got to know the Pygmies well. The Pygmies belong to the forest, they are not village people like us. . . . I often went hunting with the Pygmies, they have special traps for every kind of animal, that is why they obtain so much game. They have a special trap for chimpanzees, because chimpanzees are like human beings: when they have a problem, they stop and think about what to do, instead of just running off and crying out. You cannot catch a chimpanzee with a snare because he does not run away [and thus does not pull on the running-knot]. So the Pygmies have devised a special trap with a thread, which catches on the arm of the chimpanzee. The thread is very thin and the chimpanzee thinks it can get away. Instead of breaking the thread, it pulls on it very gently to see what will happen then. At that moment the bundle with the poisoned arrow falls down on it, because it has not run away like a stupid animal, like an antelope would.'
>
> (Boyer 1988: 55–6, my translation)

This is not a dumb hunting anecdote, but Ze's way of communicating to Boyer (among other things) the basic Faustian problem about knowledge, a problem that is no less salient for the Fang of the Cameroonian rain forest than it is for the Professors at MIT.

It seems unquestionable, on the basis of this testimony, that for this Fang wise man the idea of a 'trap' is a master metaphor of very deep significance, a refraction of Absolute Spirit if ever there was one. But let us bear in mind Faris's strictures against wise men, who may be considered not to be talking about utilitarian traps, traps in prose, but about imaginary, spiritual traps, traps as tropes, not common or garden traps. The Fang wise man does not produce any traps

for Boyer's inspection. Can we move one step on from Boyer's text, to the point at which we could mount an exhibition, in a gallery, of animal traps, and present this to the public as an exhibition of artworks?

Let us leave wise men out of it for the present and ask ourselves what animal traps reveal about the human spirit, even in the absence of native exegesis. Do animal traps, in their bare, decontextualized presence, tell us no more than that human beings like to consume animal flesh?

In order to allow you to arrive at a judgement, I offer the accompanying illustrations, drawn from the ethnological literature on traps. Take the arrow trap (Fig. 6.4). Remember that Danto says that looking at a work of art is like encountering a person; one encounters a person as a thinking, co-present being by responding to his or her outward form and behaviour – similarly one responds to an artwork as a co-present being, an embodied thought. Now imagine encountering the arrow trap, not (one hopes) as the victim is going to encounter it, but as a gallery-goer encounters an 'installation' by the latest contemporary artist. In those circumstances, and without additional context, what might the sensitive gallery-goer intuit as the thought, or intention, in this artwork?

There would be nothing amiss, I think, should the imaginary visitor to our exhibition see here, in the arrow trap, a representation of human being-in-the-world. It is a representation that the narrow-minded might prefer to censor and repress, were they only aware that the trap *could be* a representation. For it shows being-in-the-world as unthinking, poised violence, which is not perhaps a pretty thought,

Figure 6.4 Arrow trap, central Africa; sketch by Weule

but not for that reason an untrue or inartistic one. Initially, a trap such as this communicates a deadly absence – the absence of the man who devised and set it, and the absence of the animal who will become the victim (the artist has indicated this victim in the background of the illustration). Because of these marked absences, the trap, like all traps, functions as a powerful sign. Not designed to communicate or to function as a sign (in fact, designed to be hidden and escape notice), the trap nonetheless signifies far more intensely than most signs intended as such. The static violence of the tensed bow, the congealed malevolence of the arrangement of sticks and cords, are revelatory in themselves, without recourse to conventionalization. Since this is a sign that is not, officially, a sign at all, it escapes all censorship. We read in it the mind of its author and the fate of its victim.

This trap is a model as well as an implement. In fact, all implements are models, because they have to be adapted to their users' characteristics, and so bear their imprint. An artificial leg is a model of a missing real leg, a representation that functions as a prosthesis. The arrow trap is particularly clearly a model of its creator, because it has to substitute for him; a surrogate hunter, it does its owner's hunting for him. It is, in fact, an automaton or robot, whose design epitomizes the design of its maker. It is equipped with a rudimentary sensory transducer (the cord, sensitive to the animal's touch). This afferent nervous system brings information to the automaton's central processor (the trigger mechanism, a switch, the basis of all information-processing devices) which activates the efferent system, releasing the energy stored in the bow, which propels the arrows, which produce action-at-a-distance (the victim's death). This is not just a model of a person, like any doll, but a 'working' model of a person. What carving, it is surely reasonable to ask, which only shows us our outward lineaments, actually reveals as much about human being as this mechanical device? Much more of what there actually is to a human being is present here than in any carving, but because it is not an obvious instance of an 'art' object, it is never to be looked at in this light.

Moreover, if we look at other traps, we are able to see that each is not only a model of its creator, a subsidiary self in the form of an automaton, but each is also a model of its victim. This model may actually reflect the outward form of the victim, as in the comical giraffe trap shown in Fig. 6.5, which delineates, in negative contour, the outlines of the lower half of a giraffe. Or the trap may, more

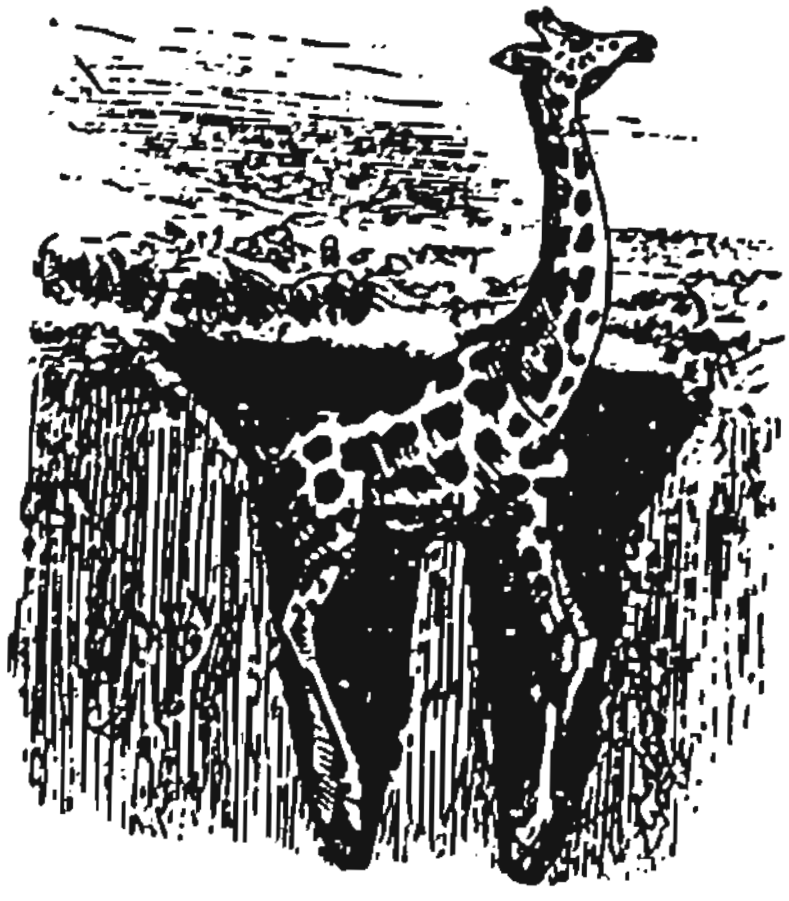

Figure 6.5 Giraffe trap drawn by Wood

subtly and abstractly, represent parameters of the animal's natural behaviour, which are subverted in order to entrap it. Traps are lethal parodies of the animal's *Umwelt* (Figs. 6.6, 6.7). Thus the rat that likes to poke around in narrow spaces has just such an attractive cavity prepared for its last, fateful foray into the dark (Fig. 6.6). Of course, it is not really the case that the trap is clever or deceitful; it is the hunter who knows the victim's habitual responses and is able to subvert them. But once the trap is in being, the hunter's skill and knowledge are truly located in the trap, in objectified form, otherwise the trap would not work. This objective knowledge would survive even the death of the hunter himself. It would also be (partially) 'readable' to others who had only the trap, and not the animal lore

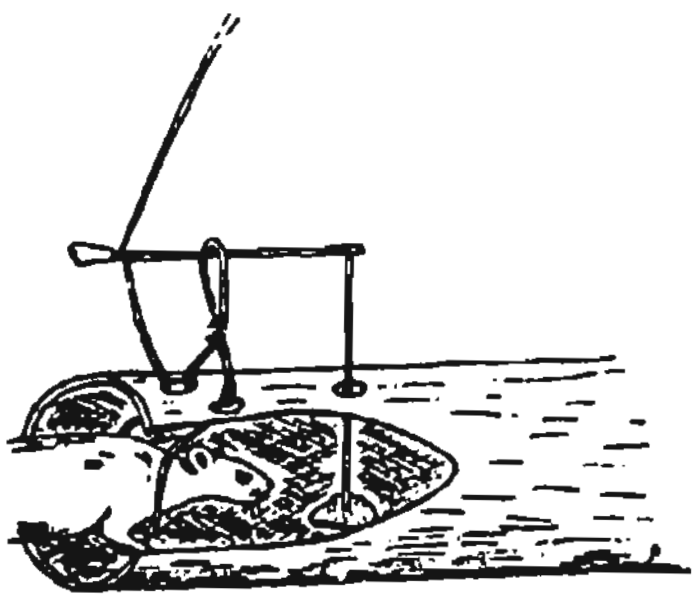

Figure 6.6 Rat trap, Vanuatu; sketch by Bell

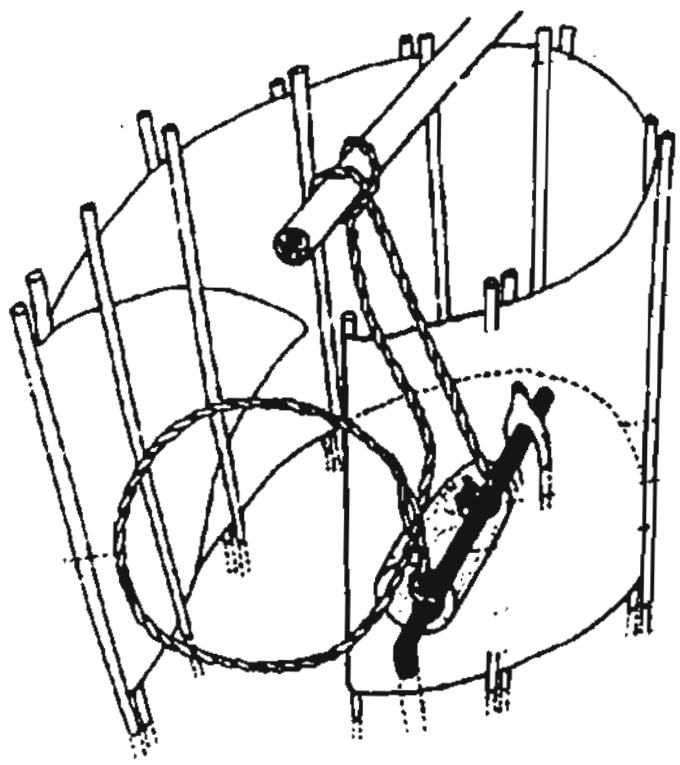

Figure 6.7 Trap from Guyana; sketch by Roth

that was reflected in its design. From the form of the trap, the dispositions of the intended victim could be deduced. In this sense, traps can be regarded as texts on animal behaviour.

The trap is therefore both a model of its creator, the hunter, and a model of its victim, the prey animal. But more than this, the trap embodies a scenario, which is the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together, and which aligns them in time and space. Our illustrations cannot show this because they either show traps awaiting their victims, or victims who have been already entrapped; they cannot show the 'time structure' of the trap. This time structure opposes suspended time, the empty time of 'waiting', to the sudden catastrophe that ensues as the trap closes. This temporal structure varies with the kind of trap employed, but it is not hard to see in the drama of entrapment a mechanical analogue to the tragic sequence of hubris-nemesis-catastrophe. Consider the doomed hippopotamus (Fig. 6.8) lulled into a sense of false security by sheer bulk and majesty. How many tragic heroes have suffered from the same hubristic illusions and have invited the same fate? If the chimpanzee who falls for Boyer's trap is Faust, perhaps this hippopotamus is Othello. The fact that animals who fall victim to traps have always brought about their downfall by their own actions, their own complacent self-confidence, ensures that trapping is a far more poetic and tragic form of hunting than the simple chase. The latter kind of hunting equalizes hunters and victims, united in spontaneous action and reaction, whereas trapping decisively hierarchizes hunter and victim. The trapper is God, or the fates, the trapped animal is man in his tragic incarnation.

Figure 6.8 Hippopotamus trap drawn by Boteler

It therefore seems to me that, even without ethnographic context, without exegesis from any wise men, animal traps such as these might be presented to an art public as artworks. These devices embody ideas, convey meanings, because a trap, by its very nature, is a transformed representation of its maker, the hunter, and the prey animal, its victim, and of their mutual relationship, which, among hunting people, is a complex, quintessentially social one. That is to say, these traps communicate the idea of a nexus of intentionalities between hunters and prey animals, via material forms and mechanisms. I would argue that this evocation of complex intentionalities is in fact what serves to define artworks, and that, suitably framed, animal traps could be made to evoke complex intuitions of being, otherness, relatedness. The impact of these traps, now being presented as artworks, might however be increased if they were exhibited in conjunction with western artworks (of which it is easy to find numerous examples) that seem to occupy the same semiological territory.

The work of Damien Hirst, the most media-exposed of younger British artists in recent times, seems to be a case in point. In fact, it was Hirst's notorious Turner Prize exhibit at the Tate Gallery in 1992 that first induced me to start thinking about traps as art objects. Consider Hirst's shark in a tank of formaldehyde (Fig. 6.1). This work captivates because of the profound contrast between the gigantic, ultra-biological fish and its aseptic glass cage, or trap (recalling Eichmann at his trial, trapped in a glass box) whose reflective walls project virtual images of the equally aseptic surrounding gallery into the shark's biological domain. A distant echo of the upper (biological) and lower (mechanical) halves of Duchamp's *Large Glass*? – no doubt – but also a reflection on our power to immobilize elemental forces, which none the less always seem potentially liable to escape. Even Hirst's shark, as dead as a dead thing can be, is still residually alive, watching and thinking, or seems to be, because it keeps its eyes open and stares at us. One day it is going to get out.

It would be appropriate to place the shark alongside this bark-painting scene from Morphy's *Ancestral Connections* (Fig. 6.9) showing the painting of a trapped shark, visually nearly identical to Hirst's installation in the Tate. The Yolngu produce this painting during funerary rituals, and it refers to the up-river journey of a mythical ancestral shark, which was temporarily trapped on the way, but which escaped. This painting refers to the deceased's clan affiliations, and metaphorizes the journey of the spirit towards the ancestral country, and the need to transfer power to it (via funerary ceremonies) so that it, like the ancestral shark, can burst out of the 'traps' that threaten to impede its progress. The episode of the shark being trapped, and escaping, is enacted by the participants. These eschatological ideas are, of course, specifically Yolngu, but I would submit that the surface similarity between Hirst's work and the Yolngu work are not just superficial, and that a metaphor is being deployed here that is accessible cross-culturally in a highly transformed, but still readable, way.

Meanwhile, to reinforce the point that Hirst's work is in a rather deep way about traps, and the network of complex intentionalities that the notion of entrapment sets up, I should simply describe another of Hirst's works in the same exhibition, which actually incorporated a working trap device. I refer to the installation consisting of a decaying sheep's head in a glass box, which breeds maggots, which turn into flies, which then become victims of a butchers'-shop type fly trap, which attracts the flies by violet light on to high-voltage

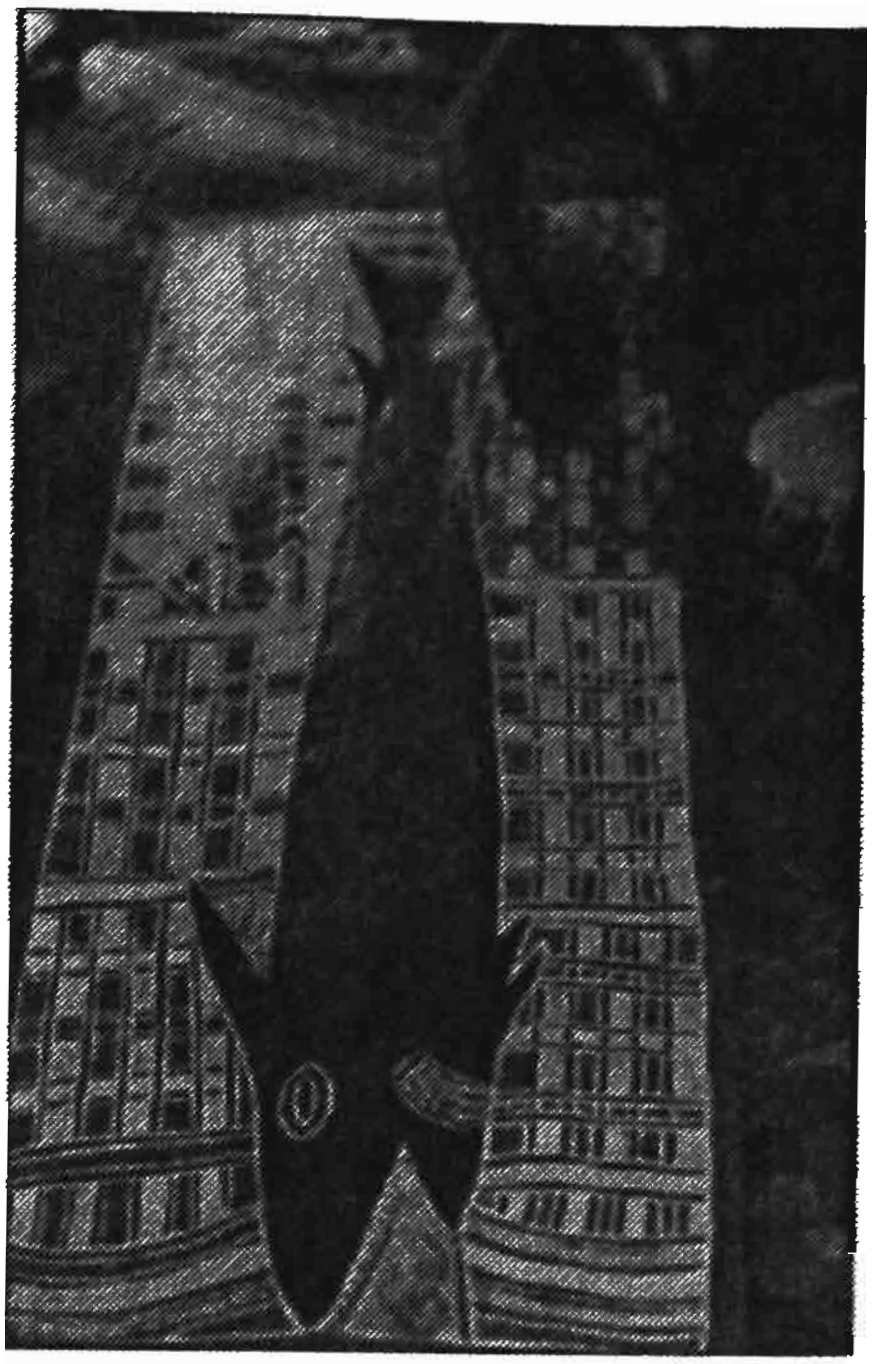

Figure 6.9 Coffin lid being painted with the image of a trapped shark
Source: Morphy 1991, fig. 7.4 and pp. 125–6, by courtesy of Howard Morphy; Photo Howard Morphy

electrified wires, on which they die. A trap within a trap, victims within a victim: as anthropologists we should be the first to recognize redundancy within the mythological code as a means of underlining the dialectical message, which in this case is to induce the spectator to identify him- or herself with the victims in this assemblage (the dead animal, the maggots, the flies) and at the same time with the vicious God who has set this rigmarole of a world in motion, the maker of traps, Hirst, you, me . . .

Hirst would not be the only western contemporary artist whose work would be on display at the exhibition of traps. Next to the arrow trap, for instance, I might install the work by the concept artist Judith Horn (Fig. 6.10), consisting of two shotguns suspended from the gallery ceiling, which periodically blast one another with red, blood-resembling liquid, drawn off from tanks above them. Evidently, at one level, this is a commentary on the senselessness of war, but the key to this work is not so much the theme of mutual violence as the marked absence of its perpetrators – precisely the theme I

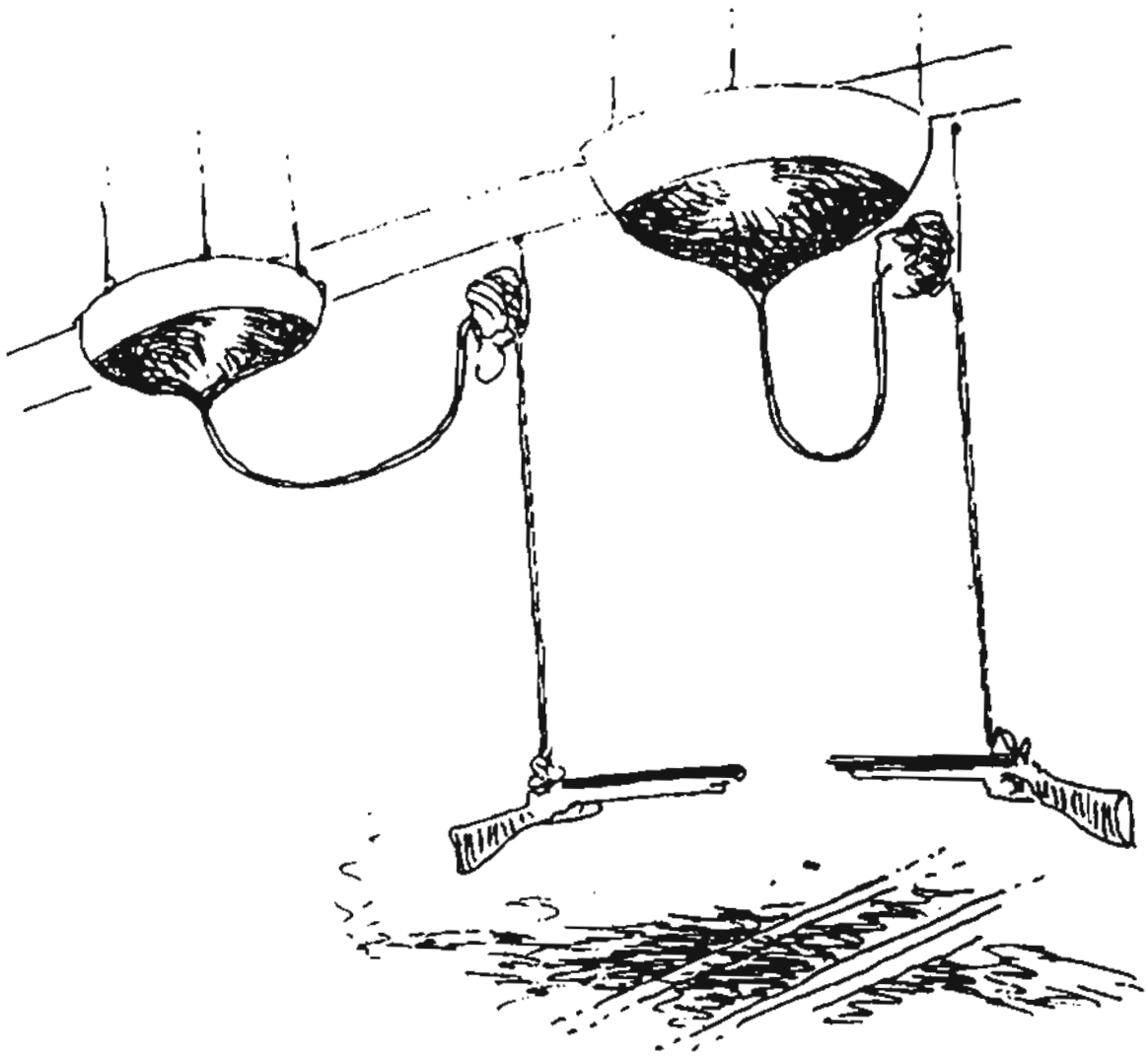

Figure 6.10 *High Noon* by Judith Horn

identified earlier in relation to the arrow trap. In fact, Horn's installation directly relates to the type of 'class war' man-traps (shotguns triggered by tripwires) that were set to deter poaching on shooting estates in times past.

Additional examples of post-Duchampian artworks (even work by Duchamp himself, such as the *Trébuchet* of 1917) that could figure in this exhibition could easily be selected, but Hirst and Horn will do for now. It is not that I would insist that a trap from Africa and the latest work of Damien Hirst are instances of the same kind of thing at all, but only that each is capable, in the context of an exhibition, of synergizing and drawing meaning out of the other. They are not the same, and are not entirely different or incommensurable either; they are, in Marilyn Strathern's (1991) phrase 'partially connected'.

Nor do I suppose that for an African trap, or a trap from any other exotic part of the world, to function as an artwork it is actually necessary or desirable for the ethnographic context to be stripped away. The artistic meaning of certain traps can often only be established ethnographically, and this makes essential a textual component to any satisfactory exhibition of 'trap' artworks – but there is no need to apologize for this; since Duchamp it has gone without saying that written notes and commentary in the form of interviews and

suchlike are necessary for the comprehension of contemporary art-works – just as a knowledge of neo-Platonic philosophy is necessary for a true appreciation of Renaissance art, I would say (Wind 1957). I simply happen to have no exegesis for the arrow trap, for instance, but this trap is so graphic it hardly needs any. With certain other traps it is essential.

Take, for instance, the angling trap from Guyana, illustrated in Roth (1924), see Fig. 6.11. I would hardly have regarded it as a particularly artistic trap unless Stephen Hugh-Jones had informed me (pers. comm.) that the equivalent type of fishing trap among the Barasana (in neighbouring Colombia) is known as the trap 'which turns fish into fruit'. Given this information, one sees at once how wittily metaphysical and magical this trap is. One moment the fish is placidly swimming along belonging (so it thinks) to the animal kingdom and then, bang, before it knows what has happened it is a vegetable, dangling from the branches of a tree, to be plucked like any other fruit by a passing Indian. What a come-uppance, in more senses than one! This transubstantiation recalls the (dead) sheep's head/maggot/fly/(dead) fly transubstantiations in Hirst's installation discussed above, but more radically, in that the fish moves between kingdoms, while the sheep's head, rather more literally, only moves between orders. Certainly, this point would not occur to a non-Barasana art public without textual clues – but once the clue is provided one does not need a PhD in anthropology to enjoy the joke, nor, I think, to be led to reflect on its deeper implications.

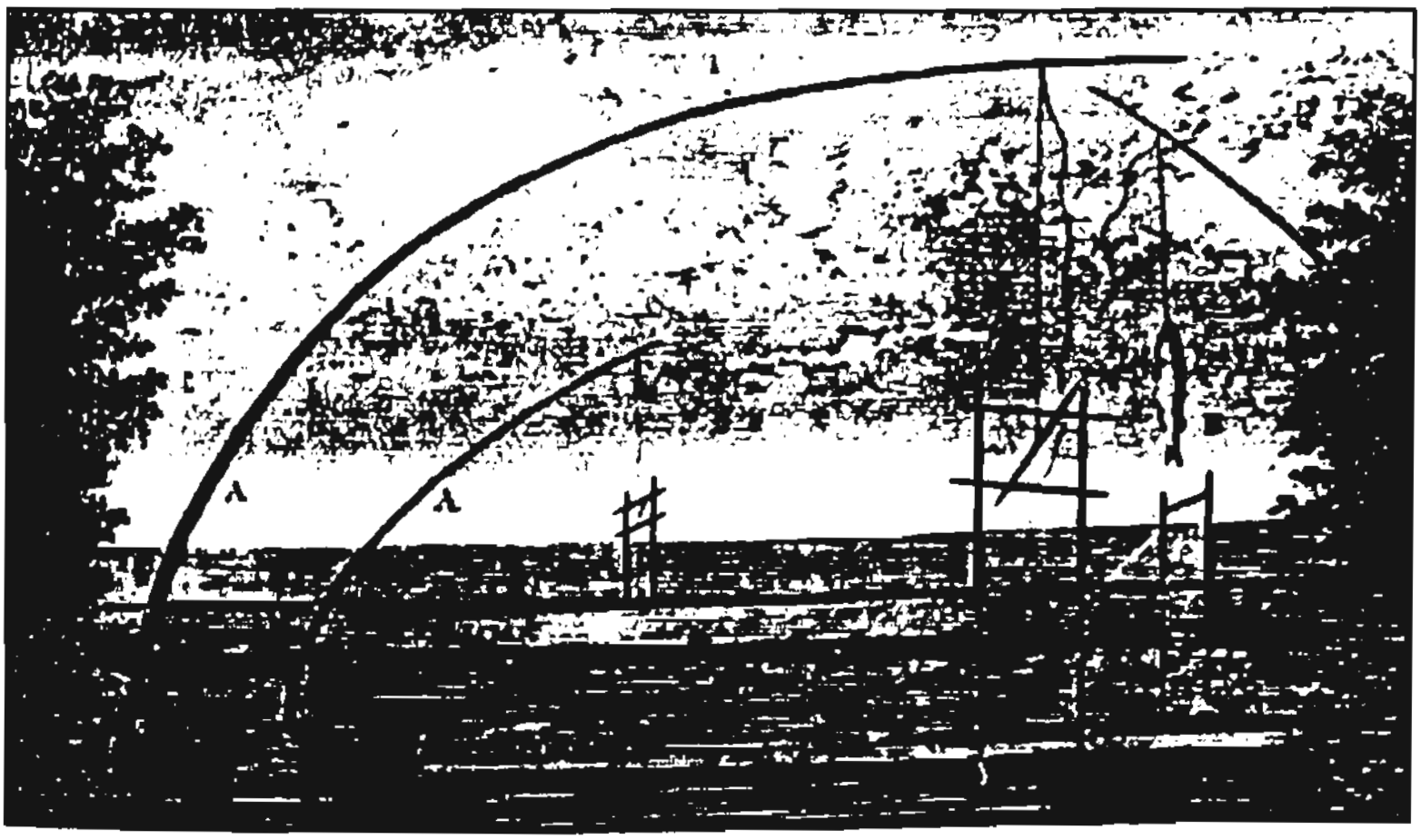

Figure 6.11 Spring-hook fishing trap, Guyana; sketch by Stedman

Another instance (which must be the last) of a trap that can function as an artwork only with the assistance of a certain degree of exegetical material is the Anga eel-trap described in a recent paper by Pierre Lemonnier (1992). This trap consists of a long cylinder of rolled-up tree-bark, bound together with numerous coils of rattan, reinforced with wood and provided with an ingenious sprung trapdoor. Eels are trapped in elongated traps like this in many parts of New Guinea and, indeed, elsewhere. What is significant about the Anga trap is the context in which it is made, and the care which is lavished on it, which could not be apparent to the uninstructed. Lemonnier's Anga trap eels in traps like these in the context of mortuary ritual, specifically, at the end of the period of mourning, when the mourners must be revived in preparation for their return to ordinary life. Feasting on eels is efficacious at this time, not just because eels are excellent, valued food; but also because eels are associated with the penis of the founding ancestor, detached because it was superfluously long. They are thus a source of spiritual vitality as well as superior nourishment, not that these categories can be completely dissociated in local terms. Were this all, the traps themselves might still be considered mere implements, because the fact that eels are sacred to the Anga does not necessarily also mean that the means of obtaining eels are sacred, or in any way extraordinary. Even the fact that the traps are constructed in the course of a ritual, with much magical attention being given to them, might not suffice to take them outside the ruck of common objects. But what Lemonnier can show – and this, very probably, would only be apparent to an anthropologist, poised between the Anga world and the western one, not a native – is that it is actually in the fabrication of the traps that the Anga construct their notion of the 'power' inherent in eels. The traps are made of strips of bark bound together with hoops of cane and provided with a trapdoor at the wider end. What Lemonnier notices is that the cane 'binding' hoops are far stronger, more numerous and more carefully made than would be needed to restrain a few eels, and, similarly, the trapdoor is much sturdier than strictly necessary. Thus it is the trap, rather than the real eel, that carries the message of eel-power. As a symbolic artefact that captures and contains eel-power, it functions, metonymically, to empower the eel, by virtue of its own sturdiness and strength. Indeed the trap, which is shaped to accommodate and attract eels, is a representation of an eel, both in the already-mentioned sense of being an objectification of eel behavioural lore, but also more

directly, in that it is itself eel-like (eel-ongated), phallic, ingestive and reproductive.

There could not be a clearer refutation of the thesis that would consign things like animal traps to the status of 'mere' artefacts, by comparison to ancestor-carvings and the like (which the Anga, incidentally, do not make) as candidates for artwork status. If the Anga embody their ancestors in fabricated form, it is surely in the form of traps such as these (as well as other artefacts, such as initiation temples). These traps are 'images of the ancestors' in the sense that they contain, embody and communicate ancestral power. Moreover, they make possible its realization of ancestral presence in the here and now as few conventional images may be said to, not 'in spite of' the fact that they are also useful implements for catching eels, but *because* of this fact. We in the west have longed for (and fantasized about) statues or images that would move, or bless, or make love, but, for centuries, always in vain. The Anga, by contrast, have 'images' of ancestral power that actually accomplish work, actually nourish those who make them, and so achieve a goal that has always eluded our artists, waylaid as they have been by the need for realistic representation of (surface) forms.

CONCLUSION

Suppose, then, that such a hybrid exhibition of animal traps from far and wide, interspersed with relevant western artworks, were to be presented to the gallery public. What might that imply for the problem with which I began this essay – the dispute concerning the criteria for artwork status? I hope that I might have said enough to convince at least some people that such a conjunction would not be wholly inopportune. The institutional theory of art would at this point immediately 'enfranchise' a large array of artefacts – hithero consigned to the *Naturhistorisches Museum* – to a place in the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*, assuring them a quite different audience and reception, since by being successfully circulated as artworks, these works would become nothing less. Would that be a retrograde step?

Speaking as an anthropologist concerned with art, rather than as an art critic or a mouthpiece for Absolute Spirit, I believe that this would be a welcome development. The worst thing about the 'anthropology of art' as at present constituted is precisely the way in which it has inherited a reactionary definition of art, so that it more

or less has to concern itself with objects that would have been classified as 'art' or, more likely, 'craft' at the beginning of this century, but has little or nothing to do with the kinds of objects (installations, performances) that are characteristically circulated as 'art' in the late twentieth century.

In effect, 'art' for the anthropology of art consists of those types of artefacts one might find on display as 'art' only in a very sleepy provincial town which (as most of them do) boasts a 'gallery' where one finds folksy ceramics, carvings and tufted woollen tapestries, not to mention innumerable still-lives and Palmeresque rural idylls. The tradition of middle-brow art that produces and consumes these things is of course indestructible, but why should the ethnographic Other be deemed a producer of 'art' only if he or she produces work that is generically analogous to such reactionary dross, even if individual works of 'primitive art', so circumscribed, are actually of the highest quality. The reason for the persistence of this state of affairs – which may, however, be unravelling as I write (see Weiner 1994) – lies in the continuing hold of the 'aesthetic' notion of artworks over the anthropological mind (Maquet 1986), since it is this definition of artworks that ensures that only 'aesthetically pleasing' carvings, paintings, pots, cloths, and so on, are to count as 'art'.

The move I advocate is the abandonment of the aesthetic notion of artworks by the anthropology of art (Gell 1992), which alone would permit the kind of direct confrontation described above, between the artefacts of non-western peoples and the productions of post-Duchampian artmaking, that is, the central tradition of contemporary art, properly speaking, not the *ersatz* to be seen in provincial arts-and-crafts galleries. One should accept the essentially liberating premiss of the institutional theory of art, which has arisen precisely to accommodate the historic fact that western artworks no longer have an aesthetic 'signature' and can consist of entirely arbitrary objects, like dead sharks in tanks of formaldehyde, and so on.

Do I mean that any object of human manufacture whatsoever can be circulated as an artwork? Is this what is implied by the 'institutional' theory of art? Potentially, perhaps, yes; but this has been trivial, in terms of contemporary art theory, since 1917, when Duchamp exhibited his notorious urinal (or *Fountain*). That was in the time of my grandfather, and the time of the great-grandfathers of today's artists, such as Damien Hirst. So if selecting and exhibiting arbitrary objects as 'art' were all that defined the post-Duchampian tradition, there would be little left to expect from it by

this late stage. Actually, things are otherwise; Duchamp's ready-mades were carefully selected and thematically tightly integrated to his two major projects (the *Large Glass* (1915–23) and the *Waterfall* (1944–66)). What is interesting about Duchamp's ready-made art objects was never the objects themselves, but Duchamp's reasons for selecting them (divulged in the course of a life-long strip-tease performance) and the same is true for the art produced by his many followers. The apparently 'arbitrary' objects of concept art are only *apparently* arbitrary, and they all work, if they do work, because they have complex (Dantoesque) historic and iconographic resonances, of which the gallery public is, to a greater or lesser extent, made aware. They are objects that are scrutinized as vehicles of complicated ideas, intended to achieve or mean something interesting, difficult, allusive, hard to bring off, and so on. I would define as a candidate artwork any object or performance that potentially rewards such scrutiny because it embodies intentionalities that are complex, demanding of attention and perhaps difficult to reconstruct fully (cf. Kant's notion of the 'free play of cognitive powers').

Thus it takes more to make a post-Duchampian artwork than merely exhibiting it in a gallery – an interpretive context also has to be developed and disseminated. In this respect the purely institutional theory of the artwork is less than satisfactory because it has nothing to say about the criteria that govern the creation of the kinds of contextual resonances to which the educated gallery public are sensitive. To this extent Danto is right to insist on the priority of interpretability in the constitution of the artwork. What is wrong with his theory, at least so far as the artwork vs. artefact distinction is concerned, is its dependence on an over-idealized distinction between 'functional' artefacts and 'meaningful' artworks. This is a legacy of post-Enlightenment philosophers such as Hegel, but it obscures the view of any art world other than the one Hegel had specifically in mind. Perhaps contemporary gallery artworks do nothing but evoke meaning; but most artworks have political, religious and other functions which are 'practical' in terms of local conceptions of how the world is and how humans may intervene in its workings to their best advantage. Artworks can also trap eels, as we have seen, or grow yams (Gell 1992: 60). The 'interpretation' of such 'practically' embedded artworks is intrinsically conjoined to their characteristics as instruments fulfilling purposes other than the embodiment of autonomous 'meaning'.

A half-way house between the 'institutional' and 'interpretive' theories therefore seems to me the best option. The institutional theory of art is amenable to the idea that artworks can be 'arfefacts' securing a range of human purposes, so long as they are simultaneously deemed interesting as art to an art public. But the institutional theory has a problem in that it is less clear about the kinds of criteria that dictate whether candidate objects will or will not be selected as artistically 'interesting'. The Danto–Hegelian conception of an autonomous art '*Geist*' will not enfranchise any but a narrow and unrepresentative range of human productions, and fails to account for the rather successful artwork candidacy of Vogel's 'net' except as the result of a category mistake on the part of the art public. A broader notion of interpretability, encompassing the objectification of 'complex intentionalities' in pragmatic and technical modes, as well as the project of communicating autonomous symbolic meaning, seems to me to overcome the problems contained in both the 'interpretive' and 'institutional' theories of art.

What the 'anthropology of art' ought to be about, in my opinion, is the provision of a critical context that would enfranchise 'artefacts' and allow for their circulation as artworks, displaying them as embodiments or residues of complex intentionalities. Anthropology should be part of art-making itself, in so far as art-making, art history and art criticism are a single enterprise nowadays. Partly this would consist of the provision of relevant ethnography (such as provided by Boyer, Hugh-Jones, Lemmonnier, mentioned earlier) and partly the discovery of connections between complex intentionalities in western artworks and the kind of intentionalities embodied in artworks and artefacts (now recontextualized as artworks) from elsewhere. This would be a one-sided transaction in art-making, in the sense that essentially metropolitan concepts of 'art' would be in play, not indigenous ones; but objects, as Thomas (1991) has shown are 'promiscuous' and can move freely between cultural/transactional domains without being essentially compromised. This they can do because they have indeed no essences, only an indefinite range of potentials.

So was Vogel's net an artwork? I believe that the New York gallery-goers who took it for one were not mistaken. Nor were they entirely swayed by the mere fact that they were institutionally invited to see it as one, by the gallery setting and the chance rhymes between the Zande net and the work of well-known western concept artists

such as Jackie Windsor. They were also, I am sure, responding to the very notion of a 'net' and the paradoxical way in which this net had been itself caught, and tightly bound, within a second net. This recursive metaphor of capture and containment would have been itself enough to give them pause, halt them in their passage, and induce them to stand and stare, like Boyer's fated chimpanzee. Every work of art that works is like this, a trap or a snare that impedes passage; and what is any art gallery but a place of capture, set with what Boyer calls 'thought-traps', which hold their victims for a time, in suspension? Vogel's net was set with care, and in it she captured, besides sundry philosophers and anthropologists – including this one – a large part of the question 'what is art?'.

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