

Theory, Culture & Society

<http://tcs.sagepub.com>

Iconic Experience in Art and Life: Surface/Depth Beginning with Giacometti's Standing Woman

Jeffrey C. Alexander
Theory Culture Society 2008; 25; 1
DOI: 10.1177/0263276408095213

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://tcs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/25/5/1>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

The TCS Centre, Nottingham Trent University

Additional services and information for *Theory, Culture & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://tcs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/25/5/1>

Iconic Experience in Art and Life

Surface/Depth Beginning with Giacometti's *Standing Woman*

Jeffrey C. Alexander

Abstract

This article examines a key question emerging from the strong program in cultural sociology – can art provide a window into social life? An examination of Giacometti's *Standing Woman* shows that art attempts to express cultural structures via immersion into and through the material surfaces of aesthetic form. Through an analysis of the iconic significance of family photos, furniture and celebrities, the article goes on to suggest that such iconic experience remains at the basis of contemporary social life. It explains how we feel part of our surroundings, how we experience the ties that bind us to the people we know and how we develop a feeling for cultural hierarchy.

Key words

■ art ■ culture ■ icons ■ sociology

IN *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proclaims that 'art is not an imitation of nature but its metaphysical supplement, raised up beside it in order to overcome it'. Explaining that 'I am speaking of esthetic delight', he insists that 'these images yield a moral delight . . . in the form of compassion or ethical triumph' (1956 [1872]: 141–2).¹

If art is not a simple representation of the natural world, then we can say, in the language of social science, that the aesthetic dimension has autonomy. But Nietzsche is not an aesthete. He proclaims for art not only a symbolic but a metaphysical status. The form of art carries a moral message. Moralizing, abstract discourse is not the only model of ethical communication.

■ *Theory, Culture & Society* 2008 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 25(5): 1–19
DOI: 10.1177/0263276408095213

Revisiting classical art, Nietzsche acknowledges that Greek sculpture succeeds because it is 'able to . . . force the contemplative eye to a tranquil delight in individual forms'. But Greek art disturbs this purely aesthetic pleasure. It forces us to look for deeper meanings that the surface simultaneously hides and reveals. Nietzsche plays with the contrast between surface and depth, clarity and mystery, challenging the modernist separation of aesthetics and morality, the two domains that Kant said must never get in one another's way. With that rationalist position Nietzsche totally disagrees. Classical Greek drama, he writes, 'penetrated the tumultuous world', so that we 'felt as though what was passing before us was merely a symbolic image, whose deepest meaning we almost divined and which we longed to tear away in order to reveal the original image behind it'. On the one hand, 'the intense clarity of the image failed to satisfy us, for it seemed to hide as much as it revealed'. On the other hand, while it seemed to invite us to 'pierce the veil and examine the mystery behind it, its luminous concreteness nevertheless held the eye entranced and kept it from probing deeper'.

Surface/Depth in the Icons of Giacometti

If we stand before such a piece of art as Alberto Giacometti's *Standing Woman*, we are struck by its tactile, textured, worked over, kneaded quality. This extraordinary craftsmanship marks one of the high achievements in the plastic arts. As Nietzsche explains, however, this arresting surface texture plays a dual role. The luminous concreteness of its sculptural surface – the clarity of its image – keeps our eye entranced. Indeed, it gives us such aesthetic delight that it (almost) keeps us from probing any further. We become contemplative before such an engrossing image, and we are (almost) satisfied.

But not quite. When we stand before the *Standing Woman*, we are also seized by an almost irresistible desire to tear this finely textured surface away. Its sculptural form convinces us that there is actually a deeper meaning behind it. Rather than clarifying, in other words, the luminous image is mysterious.

This is what Giacometti intended. The tension between surface physical form and the deeper structure of metaphysical meaning defines the greatness of his later art. As the artist and critic Alexander Liberman once remarked upon visiting Giacometti in his studio, the sculptor 'is obsessed with the unattainable. . . . How to express in art, an idea, the idea of man?' (1960: 9).

Giacometti had given up conventional painting in the mid-1920s, embracing surrealism and symbolism, the styles which first brought him public acclaim. Twenty years after this first transition, in 1947, Giacometti explained that, in those early years, he had wanted to get rid of resemblance. It had allowed the viewer to dwell too much on surface form.

It was no longer the exterior form of people that interested me, but the emotional things. . . . To copy a body at a certain time – and one that was not

important to me – [now] seemed to me completely wrong and stupid, and wasted hours of my life.

It was no longer a question of producing a figure with a superficial likeness. ('Letter to Pierre Matisse', in Lamarche-Vadel, n.d.: 175)

After a decade, Giacometti gave up his adventure in surrealism. His last effort was the cubist sculpture of a standing woman, *The Invisible Object*, which provides a reflecting mirror to the *Standing Woman*, the later sculpture (1956) which is our subject here. When *The Invisible Object* was unveiled in 1934, André Breton had heralded it as one of the greatest achievements of the era. Why did Giacometti turn so abruptly away? The answer can only be that he was not yet satisfied with his movement from surface to depth. He wanted to develop a form that would take us beneath the surface in an even more compelling way.

From 1935, Giacometti began to work only with live models, and he sculpted and painted face-to-face with human beings virtually every day for the last three decades of his life. His disappointed surrealist comrades complained that Giacometti was returning to mere representation, to more accurately portraying the surface of life. What Giacometti wanted, in fact, was to do away with formalist obstruction, to explore not formal types but archetypes of the human being. This second transition was motivated by the same desire as the earlier one; it marked a further effort to find a surface that would wield depth.

I saw again bodies that drew me back to reality, and abstract forms that seemed true in sculpture, but in a nutshell, I wanted to do the one without losing the other. [So] then I wanted to make compositions with figures. For that I had to do one or two life studies . . . and in 1935 I hired a model. These studies took me about a fortnight [but] I worked daily with a model from 1935 to 1940. Nothing was as I had thought. A head (I soon stopped doing figures, there was too much of them) became a completely unknown and immeasurable object for me. ('Letter to Pierre Matisse', in Lamarche-Vadel, n.d.: 176)

From this point on, Giacometti employed the same few models, time after time, for the rest of his life. At first it was his brother Diego. He 'has posed ten thousand times for me', Giacometti once remarked (in Peppiatt, 2001: 12). We are not surprised at the explanation Giacometti offered for this artistic choice: 'When he poses I don't recognize him. I want him to pose so that I can see what I see.' With Diego, Giacometti could more easily get beyond the exterior surface of the model's face.

When his future wife, Annette, became Giacometti's other regular model, in the early 1940s, his explanation was the same: 'When my wife poses for me, after three days she doesn't look like herself. I simply don't recognize her' (in Peppiatt, 2001: 12). Recalling an evening with the Giacomettis in the 1950s, the poet Jacques Dupin recounted that Annette had been posing for Giacometti all afternoon. Over dinner, she asked her

husband why he was looking at her in such an intense manner. He replied: 'Because I haven't seen you all day' (in Peppiatt, 2001: 13). If, as a recent biographer has remarked, 'Diego became all men to Giacometti' (Peppiatt, 2001: 5), then Annette became for him all women. Lamarche-Vadel remarked that Giacometti's famous series of 'nine busts of Annette are a collection of idols' (n.d.: 154). The artist had transformed his wife from familiar woman to mysterious archetype. Before Giacometti met Annette, he was famous for regular late night visitations to Parisian brothels. His close friend Jean Genet later suggested that his sexual behavior could be viewed in a metaphysical way.

It seems to me he went to them almost as a worshipper. He went there to see himself kneeling in front of an implacable, distant goddess. Between each naked whore and him there was perhaps the same kind of distance that his statues always keep with us. (Genet, 1958, cited in Peppiatt, 2001: 19 n10)

'You never copy the glass on the table', Giacometti once told an interviewer, 'you copy the residue of a vision. . . . One sees it disappear, then reappear.' Employing the existentialist language of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Giacometti continued that 'it is really always between being and non-being' (interview with Parinaud, 1962, cited in Peppiatt, 2001: 19 n7). When Giacometti first moved beyond surrealism, in 1935, he produced a series of sculpted heads that prompted André Breton to exclaim – 'A head! Everybody knows what a head is' (in Lamarche-Vadel, n.d.: 73). How little he understood what Giacometti was searching for!

This effort to plumb the depth by immersion into and through the surface, to sculpt and paint from models but to create anything but a model in art, set the aesthetic challenge that defined Giacometti's mature style, which he achieved only after 1945, when he returned to postwar Paris from his self-imposed exile in Switzerland. Still, while he found a plastic form to capture the tension between surface and depth, for him it could never be resolved. 'I shall never succeed', he once lamented, 'in putting into a portrait all the power a head contains. . . . To be able to make a head, one head, just once' (quoted in Lamarche-Vadel, n.d.: 7 and in Peppiatt, 2001: 162).

What were the depths that Giacometti wanted to explore? Certainly, his philosophical interpreters are right that his shockingly dark, gaunt, distant, and intensely worrying figures communicated, in the first place, the social and existential anxiety of European society after the most destructive and anti-human conflict in history (e.g. Sartre, 1948; Peppiatt, 2001: 5). But for Giacometti, just as for his close friend Samuel Becket, such an historical and generic understanding was not enough. Their art reveals the dark and uncertain fate of humanity in an archetypal way. As Lamarche-Vadel wrote about the later busts, 'the iconography of Giacometti's face is an endless catalogue of the unfolding of anxiety and care, of grief and of the stamp of age upon character' (n.d.: 7).

The new form that Giacometti created when he returned to Paris was triggered by an extraordinary epiphany, which Peppiatt calls Giacometti's 'Pauline experience' and Freud would likely have described as derealization. One evening, while the sculptor sat at the cinema immersed in a film, he felt himself descending below the surface of the screen into iconography itself.

Instead of seeing a person on the screen, I saw vague black blobs moving. I looked at the people around me and as a result I saw them as I had never seen them before. . . . I remember very clearly coming out on the Boulevard du Montparnasse and seeing the Boulevard as I had never seen it before. Everything was different: depth, objects, colours and the silence. . . . That day reality was completely revalued for me; it became the unknown. (interview in Charbonnier, 1959, quoted in Peppiatt, 2001: 7)

In an autobiographical essay published one year later, Giacometti suggested that the aesthetic framework within which he was experiencing the outside world had become transformed. It had become iconic, giving him access to the mystical but more realistic underside of social objects.² In his description, we can find the origins of his later art.

During that period I had begun to see heads in the void, in the space that surrounded them. The first time I saw a head I was looking at freeze, become fixed in that single instance forever, I trembled with terror as never before in my life, and a cold sweat ran down my back. This was no longer a living head, but an object which I looked at as I would at any other thing that was dead and alive at the same time. I let out a cry of terror as if I had just crossed over a threshold, as if I had gone into a world that nobody had seen before. . . . This vision came back often, in the metro, in the street, in restaurants or with friends. That waiter at the Brasserie Lipp who stood motionless, bending over me, his mouth open, with no connection with the previous moment or with the following moment, his mouth open, his eyes fixed and unwavering. . . . There was no connection any more between these objects separated by immeasurable chasms of emptiness. (quoted in Peppiatt, 2001: 31–2)³

The formal innovation that marked Giacometti's later work turned on creating and closing distance. In its solitude and emptiness, the human being is distant from our feelings, from our touch, from our love, cut off from the solidarity of others. Giacometti sculpts this distance by keeping his famous figures, like the *Standing Woman*, far away, naked but desexualized, in full figure but disembodied, sometimes looking or walking toward us but seeming always to be looking and walking away. Yet, at the same time, Giacometti also draws us into this separate space. He allows us to cross the distance he has created, via the soft, worked-over, kneaded texture of his form. His heads seem to be looking inward and outward at the same time, beckoning us inside while keeping us out. His figures, as Lamarche-Vadel remarked, can be seen as 'de-materializing and un-making the figure' (n.d.: 130), even while they communicate materiality in a powerful way.⁴

Giacometti wrote that, after the war, he had wanted to make ‘larger figures’, in contrast to the tiny, compressed, and obsessive miniatures he had created during the war years in Switzerland, all of which fitted into the shoebox he carried with him to Paris when he returned in 1945. ‘But to my surprise’, he testified, ‘they only seemed likenesses if they were long and thin’. Only immensely long and thin forms could seem likenesses of the powerful, anxious, and iconic associations that Giacometti had more deeply in mind. Genet beautifully captured the manner in which the formal structure of the sculptor’s later work allowed him to communicate being and nothingness.

Not only do his statues come upon us from very far away, from a remote horizon, but wherever you are in regard to them, they make it seem that you are looking up at them, are below. They are on a remote horizon, elevated, and you are at the bottom of the hill. They come hurrying to meet you and to pass beyond you. (Genet, 1958, quoted in Lamarche-Vadel, n.d.: 148)

Surface/Depth in the Icons of Society

The artist tells the truth about an object by using surface form as a device to draw us deeper, into what might be called iconic meaning. If this is successful, the specifics of the object and its production fall away.⁵ We are unconcerned with who the model was, with what the artist felt like on that day, where she did her work, or the political events of the time. As the artist draws us into this deeper level, the aesthetic object becomes a symbol, not a specific referent for some specific thing but a signifier that points to all ‘such things’. It becomes a collective representation, an ideal-type of object, person, or situation. By its very uniqueness, it triggers a process of typification. Esoteric aesthetic objects become iconic by drawing us into the heart of the world.

It is here that I come to a simple but significant sociological point. Materiality is, I would argue, just as critical for establishing ‘types’ in social as in artistic life. So is the same deceptive relation between surface and depth. In the course of everyday life, we are drawn into the experience of meaning and emotionality by surface forms. We experience these forms in a tactile way. They have an expressive texture that we ‘feel’ in our unconscious minds and associate with other ideas and things. These ideas and things are simultaneously personal and social.

In contrast to the quintessential modern conditions of impersonality and withdrawal, this movement from surface to depth represents immersion in the materiality of social life. It is immersion into an aesthetic object that makes it into an icon. In this same manner, non-aesthetic social things become iconic too.

Immersion is a dual process, a dialectic between ‘subjectification’ and ‘materialization’. By subjectification I mean the drawing of the object, seemingly external, into oneself. In this movement from object to subject, a thing becomes alive, or seems to take on life. Becoming us, it loses its objectness.

One no longer sees the object, but oneself, one's projections, one's own convictions and beliefs. By materialization, I mean to suggest the opposite experience, the process by which the subject falls into the object and loses oneself. One becomes the thing, existing inside it. One lives and breathes the object, looking outside to the world from inside of it. Its texture is your texture. Thus Flaubert's remark: 'I am Madame Bovary.'⁶

If immersion creates icons, icons allow immersion. This is a 'mystical' experience in that the distinction between subject and object dissolves. There is oneness, not duality. As the Beatles sang in *I Am the Walrus*: 'I am you and you are me and we are all together.'

Iconicism is not entirely mystical, for there is also referentiality. The subject loses itself in the experience of immersion, but the icon points outside of itself, and outside of the subject, to something else, something in the world. We have seen how, for Giacometti, the sculptural icon points to the dark side of the human condition. Any powerful artistic symbol points outside itself in a similarly iconic way. It can remind us of the stillness of a moment of domestic life, as in Cezanne or Vermeer, or of erotic excess and pleasure, as in Rubens' women. It can clutch tightly to moral significance, as in Picasso's doves, which also suggest vulnerability and loneliness. Mary Cassatt's woman sitting in an opera box, with her exposed shoulders and still fan, represents allure, and elegance, but also the privacy, even isolation, of women in the privileged class. Artistic icons have denoted men hunting, fishing, posing and dressing; medieval children ice-skating; our forebears eating, partying, marrying and dying; peasants bundling hay and raking ripe grain; burghers bursting with pride; workers sweating under their burdens; aristocrats primping, students celebrating, actors sweating; coldly angular machines, bustling and fetching cityscapes, warm seascapes and the darkly lit snowscapes of wintry days.⁷

Can such iconographic experience be at the basis of social life, even in the modern, deracinated, secularized, technological and materialistic world in which we live today? I think so. Iconographic experience explains how we feel *part* of our social and physical surroundings, how we experience the reality of the ties that bind us to people we know and people we don't know, and how we develop a sense of place, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, our vocation, indeed our very selves.

Following are some mundane examples of iconography in its everyday forms.

Family photos. They embody those whom we have experienced and loved. The tactile representations bring them into us, and we into them. As we proceed through the life cycle, and separate from what sometimes seems an infinite series of groups and individuals, we keep these loved ones with us, not only through memories but through such icons. Home and office spaces are filled with such material representations, and so are the wallets and purses we carry everywhere near our bodies. They recall, through their material surfaces, those with whom we have been most solidary in our social lives.

What is the difference between such humble family photos and the magnificent portraits and busts that fill art museums? They are looked at just as reverently; they are remarked upon and embraced, and they circulate, generating intense feelings, sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet.

Household and domestic objects. What does it mean to have furniture? To ‘decorate’ a living room or a bedroom, or to remodel the kitchen? To choose towels, carpets, covers, paint? It is not just a utilitarian matter of covering the floor to keep it warm or of providing places to work and to sit. It is a matter also of surrounding ourselves with material objects that represent our values, standards and beliefs. In doing so, these domestic icons provide continuous if relatively subdued and routinized experiences of subjectification (see e.g. Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Miller, 1998; Woodward, 2003).

Advertisements and branding. Advertisements are designed to sell things, but they do so by presenting and facilitating the dialectic of subjectification and materialization. They connect newly produced or marketed objects with earlier iconic ones. If automobiles and their advertisements are vigorously and effectively shaped, consumers immerse themselves inside their images, identifying themselves with the emotions that seethe just beneath their surface and with the objects to which they refer. As we immerse ourselves in their materiality, their materiality disappears (see Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Holt, 2004). Does this process represent the commodification of persons or, better perhaps, the subjectification of commodities? Think of the mysteries and sexualities of the Corvette, the BMW, the Jaguar; how the Volkswagen Beetle came to embody and signify asceticism and nonconformity, and even anti-materialism. There are, of course, direct parallels for these iconic social experiences in the history of art, which is filled with representations of household objects. One might think of Ed Keinholz’s automobile sculptural installations, linking car icons with the sex, drinking and gang cultures of the 1950s, or Andy Warhol’s cans of Campbell soup.

Movie stars and celebrity heroes. We make icons out of human beings in everyday social life. They are collective representations of people whom we don’t know, whom we will never know, but whom we adore and sometimes even worship. Whether bathed in darkness and sidling right up beside our fellow anonymous human beings in a movie theater, or watching television alone in our living or bedrooms, we enter into mass mediated entertainment in order to come into contact with these iconic figures, to have the experience of immersion vis-à-vis figures who are literally and figuratively larger than life. Many of us cut out their pictures from magazines or buy posters and attach their images to the walls of our offices and homes. Do we watch TV only to be informed or entertained, to laugh or cry? We watch also so that we can become one with our celebrity heroes, to become them and for them to become us, and to be connected with the things-ideas-beliefs-feelings to which their images refer.⁸

Clothing. The function of fashion and style is to drape ourselves in an image, to immerse ourselves in material forms that transform us into the ‘types’ that we have seen and would like to be. ‘Clothes make the man’ (see Rubinstein, 1995).

Make-up. Combing hair, getting a sun tan, applying lipstick, adjusting our faces in every conceivable conventionalized way – what better example could there be of this dialectic of subjectification and materialization that makes up iconic life (see Constable, 2000; Lury, 1996)?

What are the feelings that social icons generate? They are aesthetic forms, but they draw us beneath the surface into the languages and feelings of social things. Social icons are full of feeling, knowledge and evaluation. We ‘worship’ them, ‘yearn’ for them, feel as if we would ‘die’ for them. More than mere material things, they are collective representations of the social sacred, and sometimes also the profane. They are ‘divas’, queens, sex symbols and he-men. The mistress of song, the chairman of the board, the king of swing. We want to touch them, swallow them, run our fingers along them, feast visually inside of them. We want to ‘be’ them.⁹

In recent decades, after the cultural turn that has transformed the human sciences, sociologists have learned that a society’s normative standards are not established primarily by formal rules or even by such general and diffuse things as social values. Rather, they are established through collective discourses built from codes, narratives and metaphors. We need to extend this new understanding one step further still. Collective discourses also assume an iconic form. Their meanings are learned through subjective immersion and projected through materiality.

How do we know what we should strive for in our chosen roles, in our occupations, as husband, wife and partner, as player, scholar and artist, as a member of the elite or the proletariat? Might it not be through iconic experience that social standards of work, behavior, self and meaning are created, communicated and maintained?¹⁰

Not only artistic objects but social icons can be hierarchically arranged by proximity to some archetype, some ideal of the sublime, defined not intellectually but by reference to some actual material object, to its shape, its feel. We judge authenticity by such proximity, when an iconic representation captures something of the archetype that lies beneath. What seem merely to be imitations are called kitsch; they are icons that do not stimulate or facilitate immersion and identification.

Artistic icons are arranged in vertical hierarchies. It is the desire to replicate iconic sublimity that motivates achievement from those would-be artists newly arrived on the scene. Is everyday life all that different? An apprentice admires a great carpenter: ‘If I could only learn to turn a joint like Smithie.’ A young athlete fixates on an older, much more accomplished one, who in turn has ‘fallen in love’ with a great professional. A young scholar has her personal icons in her chosen discipline. So does a young chef. We all ‘know’, we feel in our bones, the standard of goodness or

greatness in whatever we try to do, whether it is combing our hair, knotting our tie, moving into the passing lane, baling hay, playing the guitar, swinging a tennis racket, making an incision or making love. We also feel, for we have also seen and touched, the standards of deviation and degradation from the ideal that we fervently wish to avoid. We know what an honest man looks like. We have icons of honesty as well as deceit, and popular culture reproduces new and old versions of them all the time. We demand that society create icons when we wish to remember some particularly outstanding individual, event or thing, or to memorialize our recovery from some tortuous social trauma. For such situations, private photos and personal icons are not sufficient. We need something more formally constructed, more public, more compelling (see Schwartz, 2000: esp. 29–142).

Radical and reactionary thinking alike have tended toward a nostalgic conviction that iconographic experiences are only available in earlier societies, in traditional life. We are supposed not to have time for such experiences today, because we are modernists, affected by the usual suspects of materialism, reification and objectification. Has not modernity eliminated contact with the sacred ‘aura’ of traditional art, which, according to Walter Benjamin (1969), is available only through contact with the real thing?

What I have wished to suggest here is that the expressive/aesthetic dimension is also fundamental in modern societies, that it communicates through material forms whose surface draws an actor inward to experience deeper moral and emotional depths. If this is so, then our experience of art is not marginal but central to our experience of modern and even post-modern life.

Bibliographic/Theoretical Note

The form of this article is not scholarly. First presented at the Yale Art Gallery to a lay audience, its ideas are developed from the thing-in-itself rather than from the thing suspended within webs of theoretical reference. That it is so suspended, however, is not something I have any wish to deny. While I have mentioned various classical and contemporary references in the notes and references, I would like to be more expansive in my theoretical framing here (see also Alexander, forthcoming).

‘Iconic Experience’ adds its voice to the growing attention to the aesthetic in social theory, an attention that revives, in a sublimated manner and without utopian metaphysics, the old romantic dream of reintegrating art and life, of reinserting form and feeling into object and utility. For the background and ambiguities of this new direction in aesthetic theory, see Matthews and McWhirter (2003). For a recent *plaidoyer* for the reintegration of art and life, and its intellectual archeology, see Gombrecht (2006a) and also Gombrecht’s instructive illustration, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006b).

For the ideal-typical postmodernist argument relating such aesthetic reinsertion to an underlying historical transformation, see Featherstone

(1992); for an argument about the broader macro-economic background of such postmodern necessity, see Lash and Urry (1994, esp. pp. 60–144) and, e.g., Welsch (1996) and Lash and Lury (2007).

As the approach in ‘Iconic Experience’ suggests, however, I have doubts about such historicist approaches to aestheticization. Material meanings have not surfaced in economic life only with the de-commodification processes that mark post-industrial, post-Fordist economies. Certainly ‘production is [today] not so much material as information’ and profit depends on ‘how information is materially embodied’ (Lash and Lury, 2007: 94); design and advertising considerations are more central to the production process than ever before; and branding has displaced any lingering sense of actual physical need as the source of value-added in production and distribution (2007: 111–44). But when Marx wrote 150 years ago he vastly overestimated the distinction between commodities produced for exchange and pre-marked objects that retained their use value. The aesthetic-cum-moral dimensions of design have, in fact, always been central to the creation of material objects, from totems to tools (e.g. John Heskett, 2002); use-value has never been purely pragmatic, and the equivalence of exchange never purely abstract (Sahlins, 1976: 166–204).

The theoretical webs in which ‘Iconic Experience’ is suspended, then, turn more on theoretical than historical logic. They complement the emphases on singularity and subjectification over abstraction and commodification that emerged in the anthropology and sociology of material consumption some 20 years ago, in such remarkable works as Daniel Miller’s *Material Consumption and Mass Consumption* (1987), Igor Kopytoff’s ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’ (1986) and Colin Campbell’s *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987).

To suggest the reintegration of art and life returns, in some manner, to Simmel’s vitalist vision, with its omnivorous, boundary-crossing aestheticism. It also points to the need not only for connecting the beautiful with the sublime, which Kant did not resist, but for relating both these aesthetic dimensions with the sociological production of moral good, which Kant did resist. As ‘Iconic Experience’ implies, the beautiful and sublime can be seen as homologous with the Durkheimian sacred, though not, of course, as identical with it. If the profane is marked by its mundanity and the sacred by transcendence, then the beautiful/sublime is an aesthetic version of sacrality and ugliness, the latter being the aesthetic equivalent of the unmarked and routine or of the profane in the sense of disgusting and offensive. (For disgusting and offensive as aesthetic categories, see Danto, 2003: esp. 49–60.) It is remarkable how Simmel’s observations about the construction of the aesthetic are homologous with Durkheim’s argument about the necessity for separating the constructed categories of sacred and profane. Writing about beauty, Simmel asserts that ‘our sensations are tied to differences’.

One of the highest aesthetic stimuli and values of this world is based on the division of the world into light and darkness, so that its elements do not flow into one another formlessly, but instead each individual has its place in a hierarchy of values between a higher and lower one, and the raw and lower forms derive their existential meaning from their being the support and background for the refined, bright, and exalted. (1968: 70)

In its discussion of surface/depth in art and life, 'Iconic Experience' gestures to recent discussions in aesthetic theory that have returned to the importance of 'material' surface (e.g. Martin Seel, 2005) and, more generally, to the burgeoning field of visual studies (e.g., Emmison and Smith, 2000). But if it complements this emerging focus on object-ness, it also insists, contra such arguments as Bill Brown's (e.g. 2001), on materiality-in-signification. Materiality should be conceived of not as a substitute for signs but rather as an alternative, non-verbal medium for symbolic communication. As Rom Harré puts it, 'an object is transformed from a piece of stuff definable independently of any story-line into a social object by its embedment in a narrative' (2002). In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), W.J.T. Mitchell develops a powerful polemic against such simplistic binaries as image/text, nature/form, icon/sign. In a recent issue of *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* devoted to 'Polemical Objects' (2004), Whitney Davis complains that 'these days, visual-culture studies often reify a pure visuality':

Indeed, visuality often seems to be taken to be a historical object – namely, 'visual culture' as such. But this approach violates the underlying theory of an original phenomenal succession *to* cultural meaning. . . . When visual-culture studies take visuality to be the very ground rather than one moment of the history of image making, it has no coherent way to relate the effects of the image itself – its supposedly constitutive ordering of vision – to the causes of its pictorial vehicle *in* vision. (2004: 9–10, emphasis in original)

The result is 'a reified pure visuality', a 'question-begging dogma' that obscures the 'disruptions that provoke visual imagination and pictorial configuration – constituting the very mechanism of the cycle of form to symbol, of image to "discourse," of the sensible to the intelligible, and round again' (2004: 9–10).

All of this has implications for long-standing debates in semiotic and symbol theory. It casts doubt, most significantly, on Peirce's argument for the purely pragmatic, non-conventionalist materiality of the icon and index. Peirce contends that a clearly visible physical similarity allows an icon to communicate more directly and purely than the symbol, whose meaning, by contrast, must be mediated by convention (see, e.g. Peirce, 1955 [1940]). But such pragmatic come-uppance to Saussure's putatively pure, or mere, discursivity – with its thoroughgoing structuralist insistence on the arbitrary relation of signifier and signified – is misleading. Materiality is non-verbal but still conventional. We must not, indeed we cannot, consider material

shapes literally, even if it is the textural qualities of their surfaces that give them distinctive communicative power. This is Barthes' argument in 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1977), and it is developed in Christopher Tilly's exploration of non-discursive signification in *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (1991). Umberto Eco makes a parallel critique of Peirce's claims for the icon in 'Producing Signs' (1985).

Mitchell challenges theoretical claims for the allegedly natural status of iconic signs from a more analytic philosophic tradition. He connects attacks on 'fetishism' with the modernist insistence on transparency and rationality and, more polemically, with an orientaling rejection of the 'primitive' qualities of symbolic, nonverbal, pictorial communication.

The notion of the image as a 'natural' sign is . . . the fetish or idol of Western culture. As idol, it must be constituted as an embodiment of the real presence it signifies, and it must certify its own efficacy by contrasting itself with the false idols of other tribes – the totems, fetishes, and ritual objects of pagan, primitive cultures, the 'stylized' or 'conventional' modes of non-Western art. Most ingenious of all, the Western idolatry of the natural sign disguises its own nature under the cover of a ritual iconoclasm, a claim that *our* images, unlike 'theirs', are constituted by a critical principle of skepticism and self-correction, a demystified rationalism that does not worship its own projected images but subjects them to correction, verification, and empirical testing against the 'facts' about 'what we see', 'how things appear', or 'what they naturally are'. (1986: 90–91, emphasis in original)

Such inhibitions about enlarging the aesthetic domain have, of course, deeply marked neo-Marxist critical theory, which has tended to associate the symbolic with the amoral and even with the totalizing, anti-critical thinking of fascism, e.g. Jay (2003: 3–27).

It is precisely by criticizing such a Kantian insistence on radically separating the aesthetic from the moral that I began 'Iconic Experience'. This separation should be seen not as the condition for reflexivity, but rather as a deeply ingrained reflex of Western culture – beginning with first Jewish and then Protestant *iconoclastic* responses to archaic and, later, Catholic forms of idolatry, or *iconology*. These responses, and their later Enlightenment manifestations, should not be confused with critical rationality as such. Rational and critical social practices, to the contrary, are deeply embedded in the dialectic of subjectification and materialization.

When Thomas Kuhn insisted, in his 'Introduction' to the second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), on the role of influential 'exemplars' in scientific training, he was emphasizing the significance of iconic experience in the paradigmatic field of Western rationality – as compared with such stand-alone modular rationalities as methodological discourse, skepticism and falsifying observation.

A similar demonstration of how creativity and criticism are embedded inside iconographic experience is provided by the innumerable autobiographical accounts of artistic innovation as being inspired by searing,

life-changing encounters with avant-garde works in the artistic field. For example, Brenda Richardson investigated why, in the early 1980s, the American painter Brice Marden broke away from his monochrome panel style, which had established his reputation as a second-generation minimalist, and moved to his Cold Mountain series, which initiated an entirely different, configurational style that made Marden a major figure in the contemporary avant-garde. Richardson discovered that ‘Pollock is a very real presence in Marden’s Cold Mountain work’, that ‘Marden keeps in close view on his drawing table four postcards of Pollock paintings [and] books on Pollock are at hand for quick reference to reproductions of [other] paintings and drawings’, and that ‘Marden repeatedly visits the Pollock paintings in New York, where he probes and ponders the work for deeper understanding’ (Richardson, 1992: 45–6).

Reflecting on her interviews with Marden, Richardson describes an ‘unconcealed awe and anger in Marden’s voice when he speaks of Pollock: awe at Pollock’s achievement and anger at the critical posture which consistently finds excuses to diminish that achievement’ (1992: 39). In Marden’s own account, his iconic experience with Pollock comes out loud and clear. In subjectifying Pollock’s painted objects, he achieved a new level of artistic freedom and autonomy, experiencing his own later style as materializations of his transformed artistic identity.

A heroic legend surrounds Pollock. Even in his lifetime, he had become a symbol. Either you believed in Pollock – who stood for the new art, the continuing modern quest – or you believed in ‘the other,’ the old-fashioned academic approach to art. . . . There’s a very American reluctance to accept genius. With Pollock, there is always somehow the notion that he was doing something ‘wrong’: ‘he dripped, he was a little crazy, he drank too much, he had an automobile accident.’ Look at [his late painting] *Blue Poles*, for instance. This is a complete painting; there is nothing more Pollock could have done to that painting. . . . Yet many people chose not to accept Pollock as capable of doing that painting. It became a very problematic work. ‘Why does a Jackson Pollock painting suddenly have these things in it?’ . . . Change in an artist’s work is the most difficult thing to accept. It’s my belief that the culture is constantly striving to suppress the artist precisely because the whole point of making art is to maintain freedom[,] and as one manifestation of that freedom, Jackson Pollock paints *Blue Poles*. . . . When I think of powerful objects in the world, I think about this Pollock drawing in Stuttgart [‘Untitled’, from 1950, another ‘late’ painting] . . . It is one of the most compelling works in the history of art. (Richardson, 1992: 40–3, emphasis in original)

Notes

This article was first presented at the Yale University Art Museum as a lecture in the series called ‘Object Lessons’. I have chosen to maintain the form of this verbal presentation. For a discussion of the broader issues which embed it, see the ‘Bibliographic/Theoretical Note’. I would like to acknowledge the stimulation of

Ron Eyerman, Ian Woodward and Frédéric Vandenberghe, and to note especially Eyerman's 'Towards a Meaningful Sociology of the Arts' (2006). An earlier version of this article was published in *Studi Culturali* 2 (2004): 253–66.

1. These and the following quotes are from these pages of Nietzsche.
2. For the ambiguities of realism, see Roman Jakobson (1987).
3. From Alberto Giacometti, 'The Dream, the Sphinx and the Death of T.', first published in *Labyrinthe* 22–3, December 1946.
4. See also Lamarche-Vadel (n.d.: passim) for the discussion of the role of distance in Giacometti's aesthetic.
- 5.

The principle of counterinduction, of ignoring the apparent, visible 'facts,' in order to produce a new kind of experience, has a direct counterpart in the world of image-making, and it is this: the pictorial artist, even one who works in the tradition known as 'realism' or 'illusionism,' is as much concerned with the invisible as the visible world. (Mitchell, 1986: 39)

6.

Early existence lives on in certain forms of object-seeking in adult life, when the object is sought for its function as a signifier of transformation. Thus, in adult life, the quest is not to possess the object; rather the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self, where the subject-as-suppliant now feels himself to be the recipient of enviro-somatic [sic] caring, identified with metamorphoses of the self. . . . The memory of . . . early object relation[s] manifests itself in the person's search for an object (a person, place, event, ideology) that promises to transform the self. (Bollas, 1987: 14)

The dialectic I am describing here bears a family resemblance to the process of subjectivity-creating-objects that Hegel formulates in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, an understanding that subsequently informed the phenomenological movement's interest in subjectivity from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. (For a significant appropriation of this Hegelian theory to explain the subjective and meaningful dimension of contemporary consumer behavior, see Daniel Miller, 1987.) My understanding differs in its suggestion that the moment of materialization need not be the prelude to a necessary estrangement or alienation. The objects so created can also provide a typifying, or 'icon-izing', moment, such that they provide pathways for subjectification.

7. For a sociological investigation of the relationships between artistic forms, archetypes, and the ideal-typical representations that form popular culture, see John Carroll (2001).

8.

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philter, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh [that] gives rise to mystical feelings of perdition. [Her] make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster . . . Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone, black like strange soft flesh, but not in the least

expressive, are two faintly tremulous wounds. In spite of its extreme beauty, this face, not drawn but sculpted in something smooth and friable . . . is at once perfect and ephemeral . . . The temptation of the absolute mask (the mask of antiquity, for instance) perhaps implies less the theme of the secret (as is the case with the Italian half mask) than that of an archetype of the human face. Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature, which explains why her face is almost sexually undefined, without however leaving one in doubt. (Roland Barthes, 1970: 56)

See also, e.g., Edgar Morin (2005 [1957]: 27–109, 135–49), Garry Wills (1997: 11–27, 309–14), Chris Rojek (2004) and Sarah Gilligan (2000).

9. For revealing studies of the iconic, artistic-cum-religious experience provided by such everyday objects as motorcycles and cigarettes, see Paul Willis (1978) and Richard Klein (1993: esp. 1–76, 135–56).

10. For the archetypal analysis of conspicuous material consumption and the maintenance of elite identity, see Thorstein Veblen (1899). Veblen contrasts this with the less pecuniary and more authentic 'instinct of workmanship' that may continue to motivate non-elite classes, and that 'disposes men to look with favour upon productive efficiency and on whatever is of human use [and] disposes them to deprecate waste of substance or effort' (1899: 93). As I suggest below, however, such an instinct for workmanship is as dependent on iconicity as leisure class consumption.

References

- Alexander, J. (forthcoming) 'Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26.
- Barthes, Roland (1970) *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, Roland (1977) 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Music/Image/Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Belk, Russell W. and Gulnur Tumbat (2005) 'The Cult of the Macintosh', *Consumption, Markets, and Culture* 8(3): 205–17.
- Benjamin, Walter (1969) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', pp. 217–51 in *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bollas, Christopher (1987) *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, Bill (2001) 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 1(1): 1–22
- Campbell, Colin (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carroll, John (2001) *The Western Dreaming: The Western World Is Dying for Want of a Story*. Sydney: HarperCollins.
- Charbonnier, Georges (1959) *Le Monologue du peintre*. Paris: R. Julliard.
- Constable, Catherine (2000) 'Making Up the Truth: On Lies, Lipstick and Friedrich Nietzsche', pp. 191–200 in S. Bruzzi and P.C. Gibson (eds) *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981) 'The Most Cherished Objects in the Home', pp. 55–89 in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Danto, Arthur (2003) *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Carus lectures. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing.
- Davis, Whitney (2004) ‘Visuality and Pictoriality’, Special Issue ‘Polemical Objects’, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 46: 9–31
- Eco, Umberto (1985) ‘Producing Signs’, pp. 176–83 in Marshall Blonsky (ed.) *On Signs*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Emmison, Michael and Philip Smith (2000) *Researching the Visual: Images, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry*. London: SAGE.
- Eyerman, Ronald (2006) ‘Towards a Meaningful Sociology of the Arts’, in Ronald Eyerman and Lisa McCormick (eds) *Myth, Meaning, and Performance*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Featherstone, Mike (1992) ‘Postmodernism and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life’, pp. 265–90 in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds) *Modernity and Identity*. London: Blackwell.
- Genet, Jean (1958) *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti*. Paris: L’Arbalète.
- Gilligan, Sarah (2000) ‘Gwyneth Paltrow’, pp. 245–9 in S. Bruzzi and P.C. Gibson (eds) *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Gombrecht, Hans U. (2006a) ‘Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds: Reclaiming an Unredeemed Utopian Motif’, *New Literary History* 37: 299–318.
- Gombrecht, Hans U. (2006b) *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harré, Rom (2002) ‘Material Objects in Social Worlds’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 19(5–6): 23–33.
- Heskett, John (2002) *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holt, Douglas B. (2004) *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press
- Jacobson, Roman (1987) ‘On Realism in Art’, pp. 19–27 in *Language in Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jay, Martin (2003) ‘Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience from the Work of Art’, in Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter (eds) *Aesthetic Subjects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Klein, Richard (1993) *Cigarettes Are Sublime*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kopytoff, Igor (1986) ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’, pp. 64–91 in Arjun Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas (1970) ‘Introduction’, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamarche-Vadel, Bernard (n.d.) *Alberto Giacometti*. Secaucus, NJ: Wellfleet Press.
- Lash, Scott and John Urry (1994) *Economies of Sign and Space*. London: SAGE.
- Lash, Scott and Celia Lury (2007) *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lieberman, Alexander (1960) *The Artist in His Studio*. New York: Viking Press.

Lury, Celia (1996) 'Making Up and Making Do', pp. 118–55 in *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Matthews, Pamela R. and David McWhirter (2003) 'Exile's Return? Aesthetics Now', pp. xiii–xviii in Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter (eds) *Aesthetic Subjects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Miller, Daniel (1987) *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Miller, Daniel (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*. Cambridge: Polity.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (1986) *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Morin, Edgar (2005 [1957]) *The Stars*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1956 [1872]) *The Birth of Tragedy*. New York: Anchor Books.

Parinaud, Andres (1962) 'Entretien avec Giacometti – Pourquoi je suis sculpteur', *Arts* 873: 13–19.

Peirce, Charles (1955 [1940]) 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs', pp. 98–119 in *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, edited by J. Buchler. London: Harcourt.

Peppiatt, Michael (2001) *Giacometti in Postwar Paris*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Richardson, Brenda (1992) 'The Way to Cold Mountain', pp. 25–90 in *Brice Marden: Cold Mountain*. Houston, TX: Houston Fine Art Press.

Rojek, Chris (2004) *Frank Sinatra*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Rubinstein, Ruth P. (1995) *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Sahlins, Marshall (1976) *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1948) 'The Search for the Absolute', in *Alberto Giacometti*. New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery.

Schwartz, Barry (2000) *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seel, Martin (2005) *Aesthetics of Appearing*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Simmel, Georg (1968) 'Sociological Aesthetics', in *Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. K. Peter Etkorn. New York: Teachers College Press.

Tilly, Christopher (1991) *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity*. London: Routledge.

Veblen, Thorstein (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Macmillan.

Welsch, Wolfgang (1996) 'Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects', *Theory, Culture & Society* 13(1): 1–24.

Willis, Paul (1978) 'The Motor-bike Boys' and 'The Motor-bike', pp. 9–62 in *Profane Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Wills, Garry (1997) *John Wayne's America*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Woodward, Ian (2003) 'Divergent Narratives in the Imagining of the Home Amongst Middle-class Consumers: Aesthetics, Comfort and the Symbolic Boundaries of Self and Home', *Journal of Sociology* 39(4): 391–412.

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University, where he is also a Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology. He is the author, most recently, of *The Civil Sphere* (2006) and (with Kenneth Thompson) *A Contemporary Introduction to Sociology: Culture and Society in Transition* (2008).