Aesthetic Archaeology

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Introduction

Examining the Kurba'il statue of the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III, an archaeologist is faced with an obvious question regarding its appearance—namely, What ends was its skilled elaboration supposed to serve (fig. 1)? To answer that, the archaeologist must consider the possibility that the statue commanded attention not just to its presence but also to its mode of delivery. As it turns out, there is a cuneiform inscription on its surface, one that describes it as a "statue of polished, shining, precious calcite whose artistic features are most beautiful to look upon."[1] The archaeologist thus has it on good evidence that the statue was indeed endowed with a public aesthetic mandate and that this mandate had to do with commanding attention to the nature of its material and its skilled treatment.[2] This kind of philological evidence is, however, not always available, and in the case of preliterate societies it is completely ruled out.

Even if the philological information about its status were not available or reliable, the dependence of the sculpture's public status on commanding aesthetic attention—attention to the merits of its mode of presentation—would

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1. Quoted in J. V. Kinnier Wilson, "The Kurba'il Statue of Shalmaneser III," *Iraq* 24 (Autumn 1962): 96.

2. See Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London, 2014), pp. 43–44.

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still be a fairly good working hypothesis, given the apparent energy and skill required to produce the fine details of this and other similar Assyrian statues. Allowing as much does not commit one to the claim that one can ever hope to experience the statue's beauty in a way that would come near to what the intended Assyrian observer was supposed to experience, just as the presence of the quoted inscription does not imply that one has thereby gained phenomenological access to its aesthetic merits or failures.

Such distinctions are seldom recognized in contemporary archaeological and art-historical theory.[3] Instead, reflecting on the principles of ascertaining the public aesthetic status of a remote artifact—How, why, and to whom it was meant to be attractive?—typically takes the form of a query after the reliability of the archaeologist's responses to its apparent aesthetic merits, with the omnipresent fear of imposing "a modern form of viewing, a modern gaze that enforces its own regime of art and levies its own value system onto what it sees as the truth of the ancient artefact."[4] The concern, in other words, is that aesthetic judgment betrays an unjustifiable belief in universal or inborn aesthetic sense, thus making aesthetic analysis a particularly unattractive mode of inquiry in archaeology.[5] That worry has lost

3. But see a passing comment on the difference between "subjective aesthetic evaluation" and "an assessment of an object's 'level'" (R. R. R. Smith, "A Greek and Roman Point of View," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4 [Oct. 1994]: 260).

4. Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*, p. 25. "How, why, and to whom it is attractive?" is the key question of aesthetic analysis in archaeology according to Raymond Corbey, Robert Layton, and Jeremy Tanner (Raymond Corbey, Robert Layton, and Jeremy Tanner, "Archaeology and Art," in *A Companion to Archaeology*, ed. John Bintliff [Malden, Mass., 2006], p. 361). For archaeological purposes, "aesthetics is concerned with the qualitative dimension of perception and the incorporation of perceivable properties in systems of value and meaning that integrate them with cultural processes" (Howard Morphy, "Aesthetics across Time and Place: An Anthropological Perspective on Archaeology," in *Aesthetics and Rock Art*, ed. Thomas Heyd and John Clegg [Burlington, Vt., 2005], p. 54).

5. For a discussion of the prospects of aesthetic analysis in various archaeological contexts, see Heyd, "Aesthetics and Rock Art: An Introduction," in *Aesthetics and Rock Art*, pp. 1–17; Michael Squire, "Introduction: The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *Arethusa* 43 (Spring 2010): 133–63; and Robin Skeates, "Towards an Archaeology of Everyday Aesthetics," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27, no. 4 (2017): 607–16. The matter has received comparatively more sustained attention in the related field of anthropology. See, for example, *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*,

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FIGURE 1. Statue of Shalmaneser III, ninth century BCE, Iraq Museum, Baghdad, credit: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg) / Ancient History Encyclopedia (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0).

ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (New York, 1994); James F. Weiner et al., "1993 Debate: Aesthetics Is a Cross-Cultural Category," in *Key Debates in Archaeology*, ed. Tim Ingold (New York, 1996), pp. 249–93.

some of its urgency over the last two decades, as an increasing number of archaeologists have concluded that "the idea of aesthetics is too useful to throw out."[6] Yet this recent rehabilitation of aesthetic analysis has not marked the dissolution of the anxiety motivating the rejection of aesthetic analysis—and the anxiety about the heuristic reliability of one's aesthetic instincts vis-à-vis remote artifacts. The anxiety springs from the unresolved and irresolvable antinomy between the archaeologist's necessary heuristic dependence on his or her own perceptual responses to the appearance of remote artifacts and the conviction that these responses are unreliable reenactments of the original mandated experiences.[7] If anything, the archaeological revival of interest in aesthetic analysis has been characterized by averting the gaze away from this antinomy.

Zainab Bahrani, for example, meets the question as to what responses were prescribed or mandated by the Assyrian monumental artifacts by drawing on philological evidence such as the Kurba'il cuneiform inscription, but she then feels obliged to supplement the philology with a defense of the reliability of certain modern responses to their apparent aesthetic merits.[8] Chris Gosden asserts that "the exact experiences of people in the past may well elude us, but the ways in which they set up worlds that made sense to them is available to us through an appreciation of the sensory and social impacts of the objects that formed the fabric of past lives" ("MS," p. 167). This supposedly requires "an unlearning: that we subject to scrutiny our sensory education" ("MS," p. 166). The correct insight that the aesthetic archaeologist's task is not to reenact a particular past aesthetic experience is obscured, then, by the suggestion that it is nevertheless the archaeologist's sanitized (because *unlearned*) appreciation of remote artifacts that somehow overlaps with the experiences of the people in the past. Lambros Malafouris, on the

6. Chris Gosden, "Making Sense: Archaeology and Aesthetics," *World Archaeology* 33 (Oct. 2001): 165; hereafter abbreviated "MS." For an examination of the archaeological revival of interest in aesthetics, see Skeates, "Towards an Archaeology of Everyday Aesthetics." Gosden's and Skeates's articles are each part of two special issues devoted to aesthetics and archaeology, itself a sign of revival; see "Archaeology and Aesthetics," a special issue of *World Archaeology* 33 (Oct. 2001), and "Art, Material Culture, Visual Culture, or Something Else," a special issue of *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 27 (Nov. 2017). See also "The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity," a special issue of *Arethusa* 43 (Spring 2010).

7. See, for example, Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York, 1998), and Thomas Habinek, "Ancient Art Versus Modern Aesthetics: A Naturalist Perspective," *Arethusa* 43 (Spring 2010): 215–30. For an overview of the present state of the "fear of aesthetics" in the humanities, see Sam Rose, "The Fear of Aesthetics in Art and Literary Theory," *New Literary History* 48 (Spring 2017): 223–44.

8. See Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*, p. 25. Specifically, she defends the modernist aesthetic fascination with ancient Near Eastern art as corresponding to a large extent to the aesthetic mandate of these objects as envisaged by their makers.

other hand, develops an "aesthetics of material engagement" that purports to provide the principles of reenacting aesthetic experiences accompanying the skillful production of artifacts by recovering the experiences' traces in the material conditions that embed them.[9] His exclusive focus on reenactment leaves no space for the discussion of the prescribed range of aesthetic responses the artifact itself was meant to attract—making a tool may or may not be aesthetically rewarding on a particular occasion, but that alone says very little about its public aesthetic mandate.

What these three cases share is the failure to distinguish between aesthetic analysis and aesthetic criticism—to disassociate determining a remote artifact's public aesthetic mandate from ascertaining its aesthetic merits. If archaeologists make their judgments part of aesthetic analysis, they become vulnerable to the anxious self-examination regarding the heuristic reliability of their aesthetic instincts.

This article interrogates the impact of this anxiety, in an effort to clear the ground for the idea of aesthetic archaeology as an aesthetic analysis of remote artifacts divorced from aesthetic criticism. It also makes the claim that establishing an aesthetic mandate of a remote artifact should in the first place be part of a quest after the norms of engagement an artifact's kind signaled to the intended audience by its appearance.[10] The article admittedly stops short of filling the carved-out conceptual space with specifics; that task will be carried out in subsequent work. But even if the concept of aesthetic archaeology proved of little use to practicing archaeologists, the formulation of the anxiety's vicissitudes should also, or perhaps primarily, be read as a contribution—in fact, a challenge—to aesthetics. Rather than advocate for a new subdiscipline, the concept of aesthetic archaeology serves to bring into theoretical focus an aesthetic engagement with an artifact's appearance under circumstances that rule out any acquired competence in distinguishing its aesthetic mandate perceptually—and thus rule out any aesthetic expertise.[11]

9. See Lambros Malafouris, "The Aesthetics of Material Engagement," in *Situated Aesthetics: Art beyond the Skin*, ed. Riccardo Manzotti (Charlottesville, Va., 2011), pp. 171–94.

10. A separate question, not addressed in the present article, is how widespread the practice of prescribing aesthetic attention publicly has been in human history. In the context of pre-Columbian archaeology, for example, Esther Pasztory suggests that although the "means [of pre-Columbian cultures] were aesthetic, these were as implicit as the good design of cars or rockets is implicit—indeed not their primary function," but immediately adds that "any perusal of the few texts available on the arts or artists of the Aztec, Inca, and Maya indicates a high regard for skill, the ability to understand a commission in terms of the genre required, and the imagination to invent something new and different," casting doubt on just how "implicit" the aesthetic function really was (Esther Pasztory, *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art* [Austin, Tex., 2005], p. 193). See also her remarks on "aestheticisim"; see pp. 79–80.

11. "An aesthetic expert is configured so as to routinely act on the aesthetic reasons they have" (Dominic McIver Lopes, *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value* [Oxford, 2018],

Aesthetic archaeology thus raises the demand for an aesthetics of remote artifacts, that is, a theory of aesthetic analysis independent of the model of competent aesthetic judgment or appreciation.[12]

To draw a distinction between aesthetic criticism and aesthetic archaeology does not purge from the latter any use of aesthetic vocabulary or any aesthetic engagement whatsoever. The demand that aesthetic archaeology be independent of appreciation is not tantamount to the request that it renounce any relevance of what may strike one as merits of particular modes of presentation. The difference between aesthetic criticism and aesthetic archaeology proper rests in the different epistemic role aesthetic sensitivity plays in the respective realms of inquiry. In aesthetic criticism, this sensitivity achieves the status of aesthetic expertise: the competence to access ("appreciate") the merits as prescribed or mandated.[13] By contrast, aesthetic archaeology—the aesthetic analysis of remote artifacts—situates the observer outside of the jurisdiction of any such aesthetic expertise. Her or his aesthetic sensibilities may be employed to help formulate not aesthetic judgments but, at best, aesthetic beliefs—psychological guesses as to what the general structure of an artifact's appearance suggests about its public mandate, aesthetic, or otherwise.[14]

In the following, a controversy surrounding Cycladic marble figures' aesthetic status will exemplify the paralyzing effects that the anxiety about the reliability of one's aesthetic responses has on the study of remote artifacts. The anxiety does not manifest itself always in the same manner, however.

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p. 59). On the role of perceptually distinguishing artistic categories, see Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," in *Marvelous Images: On Values and the Arts* (New York, 2008), pp. 195–219.

12. The idea that aesthetic theory should expand its scope beyond theorizing the principles of competent aesthetic judging has received increased attention recently; see Lopes, *Being for Beauty*, and Bence Nanay, "Against Aesthetic Judgments," in *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability*, ed. Jennifer A. McMahon (New York, 2018), pp. 52–65. Furthermore, the notion that aesthetic archaeology—or the "archaeology of aesthetics"—should be divorced from aesthetic criticism is implicit in Howard Morphy's anthropological aesthetics, "which—more than 20 years on—remains the only publication to deal explicitly with an archaeological method and theory for aesthetics" (Skeats, "Towards an Archaeology of Everyday Aesthetics," p. 610). See Morphy, "Aesthetics across Time and Space."

13. I prefer to talk of aesthetic *merits* rather than *properties* or *values* to stress that aesthetic criticism as a historical method seeks to access aesthetic mandates via appreciation. Aesthetic merits are successes at accomplishing public aesthetic mandates—to be attuned to such accomplishments is thus to be sensitized to the mandates as well. For a sympathetic discussion (and a defense of sorts) of the idea of appreciation as a means of establishing contact with the maker's mandate, see Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism* (University Park, Pa., 2019). For a recent example of a merit-based approach in aesthetics, see C. Thi Nguyen, "The Uses of Aesthetic Testimony," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (Jan. 2017): 19–36.

14. Unlike aesthetic judgments, aesthetic beliefs are acts of psychological guesswork about what might be commanding the attention of competent observers. On aesthetic belief, see Keren Gorodeisky and Eric Marcus, "Aesthetic Rationality," *Journal of Philosophy* 115 (Mar. 2018): 113–40.

Its bouts can be as severe as when one denies the very feasibility of recovering remote aesthetic mandates. In other cases, the anxiety can be almost completely suppressed, as when one treats remote artifacts as if they were familiar. But whether mild or extreme, the anxiety cannot disappear if aesthetic archaeology is understood on the model of aesthetic criticism under the conditions of remoteness.

Cycladic Aesthetic Criticism

Not everyone experiences the same level of anxiety about the reliability of one's aesthetic responses to remote artifacts. Pat Getz-Gentle (formerly Getz-Preziosi), an expert on the famous Early Bronze Age marble figures from the Cycladic Islands, subjects them to an aesthetic criticism usually associated with contexts where the existence of a refined art culture is well documented. While admitting that "Early Bronze Age standards of artistic excellence may have differed from" today's norms, she holds that "it should be possible to assess the relative merits of a piece along lines with which the prehistoric islander might well have agreed."[15] Her self-described "partly intuitive and largely visual approach" is supposed to rely on "common sense and a close scrutiny of a large amount of material" and is allegedly "developed naturally from observation."[16] She has claimed for Cycladic sculpture "a harmony of proportion that is unique in prehistoric art," the sign of "its sculptors' tenacity to certain principles of form and beauty" (*SC*, p. 34). This sensitivity to the aesthetic norms governing the Cycladic craft made her confident enough to assess its high and low points, as well as to identify imprints of the genius of individual "masters."

Among the Cycladic "masters" that Getz-Gentle claims to have identified, one finds Stafford Master, named after a particularly well-preserved sculpture in the Stafford family collection (fig. 2). She characterizes him (her choice of gender) as "an artist with a very confident and boldly stylized approach to the human form." A distinct feature of his style is a "continuous arc formed by the outline of the head, neck, and long sloping shoulder." This feature is according to her "more graceful and fluid" on the "name-piece" than on a near-identical figure in the Louvre, also ascribed to the Master (fig. 3) (*SC*, p. 123).

One can discern the following inner logic implicit to Getz-Gentle's approach. Her aesthetic response to the gracefulness of the Stafford piece is informed by her sensitivity to those features (the "continuous arc") that

15. Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades: Individual and Tradition in the Third Millennium BC* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1987), p. 35; hereafter abbreviated *SC*.

16. Pat Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture* (Madison, Wis., 2001), p. xv.

FIGURE 2. Cycladic figure, 27 cm, Stafford collection, from *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture* by Pat Gentz-Gentle. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

FIGURE 3. Cycladic figure, 27 cm, Louvre, circa 2300 BCE, from *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture* by Pat Gentz-Gentle. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

suggest it is meant to manifest gracefulness. And she finds the Stafford Master's other works that replicate the same continuous arc striving for the same artistic achievement of gracefulness, even if they fail to reach the level of perfection manifested by the name-piece. The recovery of their shared aesthetic mandate is informed by her own evaluative engagement; it is her seeing the gracefulness of the name-piece that is instrumental to classifying its public aesthetic status, to which belong all the artifacts that replicate the arc. In other words, the fact that the continuous arc is characteristic of an effort to achieve gracefulness is derived from her aesthetic response to its instantiation.

It is this unchecked reliance on one's aesthetic sensibilities that Colin Renfrew, a leading expert on Cycladic sculpture, cautioned against when he recommended that we "examine our own response and that of our time to works that we esteem as seriously interesting or beautiful" in order to avoid "placing great emphasis upon qualities that their original makers may not greatly have valued."[17] Renfrew's skepticism about the prospects of escaping one's own evaluative outlook in assessing the appearances of remote artifacts is generally shared by students of remote cultures. No wonder, then, that Getz-Gentle's "intuitive" approach has garnered criticism among established Cycladic archaeologists. For Cyprian Broodbank, "modern connoisseurship" was unlikely to "provide us with a plausible means to access such ancient experiences."[18] And perhaps most condemningly, David Gill and Christopher Chippindale asserted that whatever appeal the Cycladic figures had for the contemporary observer, it revealed no relevant data about the Cycladic society. As Gill and Chippindale claimed in painstaking detail, quite the contrary had been the case; judgments of aesthetic merit were instrumental in the acceptance of figures from looted sites and of no secure origin by major auction houses, art collections, and museums, effectively "diverting and clouding our grasp of the realities of human life on the Cycladic islands."[19] The consensus is, then, that no matter how compelled one feels to infer from the beauty of certain Early Cycladic marble figures that beautiful was what these classes of objects aspired to be, one must resist the urge, lest one become vulnerable to the familiar charge of anachronistically imposing a modern aesthetic regime and value system onto remote artifacts. Incidentally, Getz-Gentle's own research unintentionally helped support this conclusion. Having studied the isotope analysis of the marble used

17. Colin Renfrew, *The Cycladic Spirit: Masterpieces from the Nicholas P. Goulandris Collection* (New York, 1991), pp. 168, 169.

18. Cyprian Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (New York, 2001), p. 63.

19. David W. J. Gill and Christopher Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures," *American Journal of Archaeology* 97 (Oct. 1993): 658.

and the institutional history of the Louvre figure, she herself was forced to conclude that the Stafford piece was almost certainly a forgery based on the supposedly less graceful Louvre piece.[20] With a dose of irony, one could be permitted to say that the Stafford piece's heightened gracefulness really was revelatory of the motivation behind its production and of the corresponding public mandate. Only the motivation and the mandate weren't so much of Cycladic provenance as those of a culture common to Getz-Gentle and the forger(s).

While the criticism of Getz-Gentle is generally sound, one learns very little from her critics about what, if any, relevance should the striking appearance of Cycladic figures play in the archaeological heuristic. Tellingly, none of them propose an alternative to her approach. Whereas Gill and Chippindale plainly reject any contribution of aesthetic inquiry, Broodbank allows that "it would be foolish to deny the possibility, even the likelihood, that the marble figurines . . . were regarded during the [Early Bronze Age] as finely crafted, symbolically charged and perhaps sensuous objects," but he does not elaborate further.[21] As for Renfrew, he admits to ongoing puzzlement about "what it should be that makes the product of that particular culture so very beautiful to our eyes. For, undoubtedly, they were seen quite differently then." His conclusion is not very encouraging: "There is an enigma which I've addressed several times, really, and not with a very coherent conclusion."[22] These reactions mirror the ruling status quo in archaeological and art-historical research into remote art; the fate of aesthetic archaeology as a study of the aesthetic public status of remote artifacts is indistinguishable from the fate of aesthetic criticism under the conditions of remoteness.

Suspicion Spectrum

Unlike some of his colleagues, Renfrew does not seem to be fully content with the convenient explanation that the aesthetic authority that Cycladic figures command today over us in a museum has little or nothing to do with the authority they exercised in their original setting.[23] There is more to be said about this strange phenomenon, Renfrew suggests, yet he hasn't found a satisfactory way of saying it. To entertain, as Renfrew does, the possibility that

20. See Getz-Gentle, *Personal Styles in Early Cycladic Sculpture*, pp. 104–7.

21. Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades*, p. 63.

22. Renfrew, "A Conversation," in *Art and Archaeology: Collaborations, Conversations, Criticisms*, ed. Ian Alden Russell and Andrew Cochrane (New York, 2014), pp. 15, 14. For his efforts, see Renfrew, *Figuring It Out: What Are We? Where Do We Come From? The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists* (New York, 2003).

23. See Gill and Chippindale, "Material and Intellectual Consequences of Esteem for Cycladic Figures."

the overlap between the current aesthetic appeal of remote objects and their original mandate is not a mere coincidence is to enter a controversial territory, given the general skepticism of students of remote cultures about the prospects of escaping one's own evaluative outlook. To keep one's aesthetic sensibilities in check when speculating about the original mandated effects of viewing remote artifacts continues to be a major imperative of all the main archaeological, art-historical, or anthropological traditions of research into their appearance.

They all converge on one important point: when interpreting the meaning and function of an artifact of temporally or culturally distant origin, the researcher ought to be suspicious of any assessments of the intended effect of the artifact's appearance that would involve her or his aesthetic sensibility. The reason for this mistrust of aesthetic appreciation is straightforward: by employing one's aesthetic sensibility, informed as it is at least in part by historically contingent circumstances, one cannot be relied on to identify correctly the mandated effect.

While most art historians and archaeologists uphold some form of this principle (what I will refer to as the suspicion principle), the nature of their commitment varies widely. In its moderate version, the principle states that the researcher *should* employ her or his aesthetic sensibility but only under the supervision of scholarly erudition as a necessary corrective: "Archeological research is blind and empty without aesthetic re-creation, and aesthetic re-creation is irrational and often misguided without archaeological research."[24] Richard Neer, the suspicion principle's contemporary proponent, argues that, as a heuristic, aesthetic appreciation is an irreplaceable means of making sense of the ways archaic artifacts could have appeared to their beholders and affected them. No amount of archaeological context can substitute for the kind of aesthetic sensitivity to style that, according to Neer, produces basic facts of archaeology. Nor can it suppress the fact that in producing accounts of the meaning and role of archaic visual art, art historians and archaeologists cannot but start from and appeal to contemporary senses of visual conspicuousness.[25] The conviction that aesthetic sensibility provides a legitimate entry point in the study of the visual salience of remote artifacts is arguably shared also by those who do not necessarily subscribe to the view that the task of the archaeologist or art historian is or ever can be "aesthetic re-creation," or the reenactment of a particular aesthetic experience. To wit, some see the particularity of

24. Erwin Panofsky, "Introduction: The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), p. 19.

25. See Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago, 2010), pp. 6–12.

the art-historical task of explaining the motivations behind the production of objects in the "sharpen[ing of] our legitimate satisfactions in them."[26] The art historian is supposed to be an art critic working under the conditions of remoteness ("observer" as opposed to "participant"), providing necessarily "crude, over-explicit, and uninteriorized" information to the audience that shares her observer status.[27] This explanation will unavoidably involve stressing things that may not have loomed large in the participants' experience but are aesthetically relevant to the historian's contemporaries.[28] For other archaeologists and anthropologists, contemporary aesthetic relevance represents merely a strategic advantage in their effort of arousing the public's interest in remote artifacts' function, meaning, and stylistic development. They will insist, however, that if the research into their original function, style, and meaning is to go beyond connoisseurship and be ethnographically sensitive, this initial aesthetic response must be suppressed, as it may prevent one from recognizing the historically and geographically limited aesthetic canon that may have no bearing on our own.[29] But even this version of the mistrust of aesthetic appreciation will strike a certain type of student of remote art as ideologically suspicious, as it still subscribes to a distinction between various local aesthetics on the one hand and a detached, "scientific" (historic, ethnographic, archaeological) access to them.[30] This type of student would adhere to a more extreme view according to which it is not that one should bracket one's aesthetic sensibilities; rather, one ought to part company with the very idea of the observer aesthetic altogether as such a standpoint is in denial about its inevitable contamination by the supposed ideological baggage—disinterested contemplation, autonomous art, and so on—that makes its use toxic outside of the narrow confines of Western modernity where it was developed. In short, there is no escaping "the values of one's circumstances."[31] On the other end of the spectrum, explicitly developed to oppose the more

26. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), p. viii.

27. Ibid., p. 111.

28. See ibid., p. 109.

29. See Renfrew, "Hypocrite voyant, mon semblable. . .," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4 (Oct. 1994): 264–68; Philippe Descola, "L'Envers du visible: ontologie et iconologie," in *Cannibalismes disciplinaires: Quand l'histoire de l'art et l'anthropologie se rencontrent*, ed. Thierry Dufrêne and Anne-Christine Taylor (Paris, 2009), pp. 25–36.

30. See Donald Preziosi and Clair Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is* (Malden, Mass., 2012).

31. Keith Moxey, "Art History after the Global Turn," in *Is Art History Global?* ed. James Elkins (New York, 2007), p. 209. "But how can we define the practice of such [a remote aesthetic observer] . . . as distinct from his or her broader interaction with the external world and without resort to transcendent or immaterial categories and concepts? The answer is that we can't" (Habinek, "Ancient Art Versus Modern Aesthetics," p. 223).

radical forms of skepticism, a variety of optimism has recently surfaced in philosophical aesthetics because of the growing influence of evolutionary psychology on the humanities. According to this view, humans (perhaps even hominins) have been equally susceptible to at least some aesthetic attractors. Consequently, even if one lacks access to the cultural context of objects displaying what appears to be an intentional application of aesthetic means, it is precisely because one responds positively to these means that one has good grounds for classifying these artifacts as mandating aesthetic appreciation. This position is gaining traction among aestheticians participating in the noticeable revival of efforts at explaining art's apparent global spread in the evolutionary terms of its marking the fitness of their producers.[32] And, finally, although hardly ever explicitly acknowledged, there is the position of someone like Getz-Gentle, which pays only lip service to the suspicion principle but in practice treats remote artifacts as if they were familiar.

Aesthetic Archaeology without Aesthetic Criticism

The one unquestioned premise of all the sketched positions, wherever they are located on the suspicion spectrum, is that they understand the determination of the aesthetic status of remote artifacts as one relying on appreciating the aesthetic merits of particular objects, that is, as aesthetic criticism. Indeed, the difference between the various positions may well be captured by tracking their respective answers to the question after the standing of aesthetic criticism under remote conditions; the optimists will argue for a responsible critical practice aware of the limitations imposed by remote conditions, whereas the more skeptical will claim that there is no space for aesthetic criticism under such conditions. The shared assumption that aesthetic archaeology is a form of aesthetic criticism is virtually never made explicit, however, perhaps because it may seem self-evident, a necessary consequence of the suspicion principle. Yet the assumption misrepresents the nature of aesthetic archaeology, which should be distinguished from aesthetic criticism, and the difference is not one of degree. That is, the difference does not consist merely of the archaeologist's commitment to recognizing the extent to which an

32. See Stephen Davies, "First Art and Art's Definition," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 35 (Spring 1997): 19–34 and *The Artful Species* (Oxford, 2012); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York, 2009); Gregory Currie, "The Master of the Masek Beds: Handaxes, Art, and the Minds of Early Humans," in *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie (Oxford, 2011), pp. 9–31, "Art and the Anthropologists," in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience*, ed. Arthur P. Shimamura and Stephen E. Palmer (New York, 2012), pp. 107–28, and "Aesthetic Explanation and the Archaeology of Symbols," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (July 2016): 233–46; and Johan de Smedt and Helen de Cruz, "A Cognitive Approach to the Earliest Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (Fall 2011): 379–89.

appreciation of a culturally remote artifact will be impoverished or compromised because of a lack of access to its cultural context. The question "How can one guess that an artifact has been endowed with an aesthetic mandate?" differs from "How does one appreciate an artifact adequately?" in that, unlike the latter question, the former addresses a heuristic problem, one of ethnographic methodology rather than meta-aesthetics. The latter question already assumes that nothing prevents one in principle from establishing the aesthetic status of an artifact (in other words, it is a matter of acquiring expertise), and the focus is therefore on the norms of criticism intrinsic to that particular status—with the skeptic simply refusing to engage in the debate for cases of remote artifacts (this has been essentially the reaction of Cycladic archaeologists like Broodbank or Gill and Chippindale). The former question, on the other hand, is part of a broader inquiry into the norms of establishing the artifact's public status. This inquiry involves a research into the artifact's configuration with respect to a broad range of possible uses.[33] The task of aesthetic archaeology ought to be to determine whether and how an artifact from a distant culture has been endowed with an aesthetic mandate, that is, whether and how it was meant to merit aesthetic attention, independently of the archaeologist's own appreciative stance. Indeed, we have already encountered an example of such an approach: the aesthetic mandate of the Kurba'il statue of Shalmaneser III could be established with reference to the cuneiform inscription. But what about instances where no such epigraphic evidence is available, as in the case of the Cycladic figures?

For the aesthetic archaeologist to avoid the consequences issuing from the practice of aesthetic criticism, she or he needs to maintain what may seem an impossible position of an uninitiated observer trying at the same time to be sensitive to aspects visible only to the initiated. But rather than being impossible, the mission of a proper aesthetic archaeology is modest: to look for symptoms of the public status of artifacts whose standing depended on them successfully commanding attention to how they look. The modest program of aesthetic archaeology keeps it on the right side of the distinction between analysis and criticism. According to this program, archaeological retrieval of aesthetic mandates ought to focus on the artifact's general conditions of presentation—features that influence how artifacts

33. For a good overview of the stakes with respect to prehistoric figurines, see Richard G. Lesure, "Comparative Perspectives in the Interpretation of Prehistoric Figurines," in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines*, ed. Timothy Insoll (Oxford, 2017), pp. 37–60, which builds on his *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art* (New York, 2011). On the hermeneutics involved in recovering artefact kinds, see Ammie L. Thomasson, "Public Artifacts, Intentions and Norms," in *Artefact Kinds: Ontology and the Human-Made World*, ed. Maarten Franssen et al. (New York, 2014), pp. 45–62.

possessing them are to be perceived and handled—in order to ascertain whether these conditions suggest, or increase the likelihood of, an aesthetic mandate. But whatever it is that points towards the mandate, it cannot be the artifact's aesthetic merits, as attending to general conditions of presentation cannot by itself provide access to them, that is, unless one ceases to honor the distinction between analysis and criticism and becomes a critic vulnerable to the anxiety plaguing the prospects of aesthetic archaeology. To remain on the right side of the distinction, then, aesthetic archaeology must focus on general cues or symptoms aesthetic mandates leave behind: traces of prescribing aesthetic attention to appropriate audiences.

One way of shining a light on the modest program of aesthetic archaeology is to say that it involves something akin to what George Kubler referred to as *judgment by setting* rather than *judgment by intrinsic merit*. Kubler introduced the distinction in order to explain what he called "serial appreciation," a distinct aesthetic capability of expert students of remote visual art, a sensitivity not to the particular aesthetic merits of an artwork but rather to its instantiation of features recognized as belonging to a "formal sequence." Judgments by setting focus on the "scripts," or patterns within which serial variations happen.[34] Kubler's notion of "setting" corresponds to his later definition of "format" as a term that "identifies stable configurations enduring through time as recognizable entities." These visible configurations are replications of "size, shape and composition."[35] The sensitivity to setting should be understood as zeroing in on the replicable circumstances that enable the individual intrinsic merits, as when one perceives the characteristic continuous arc of the Louvre statue as a replicable variation within a diachronic sequence. By contrast, judgments by intrinsic merit are carried out under circumstances where their setting has already been internalized so that one can appreciate the aesthetic merits of an individual artifact with confidence, as when one is struck by the elegance of the Louvre piece's continuous arc.

Kubler introduced the distinction as a reminder to the judge-by-intrinsic-merit that the confidence with which she or he exercises her or his aesthetic sensibilities to determine the aesthetic significance of a particular object is the result of her or him having internalized the circumstances that establish the norms of her or his engagement with the work—the very circumstances one appreciates when judging by setting. To be sure, such a reminder is compatible with

34. See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, Conn., 1962), pp. 45–46.

35. Kubler, "Towards a Reductive Theory of a Visual Style," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), p. 170.

the view I want to leave behind—that the aesthetic archaeologist is just an aesthetic critic appropriately aware of the remote circumstances under which she or he attributes aesthetic merits.[36] Such a reading of Kubler's distinction still reflects an inadequate grasp of the difference between aesthetic criticism and aesthetic archaeology. Judgment by setting needs to be divorced from judgment by inner merit in the sense that the former would not share in any way the normative space of the latter.[37]

Even if it is generally the case that what drives the actual practices of replicating the formats of aesthetic artifacts are sensitivities to their aesthetic merits (that is, their producers try to excel in delivering the aesthetic goods), these sensitivities ought to be regarded as inaccessible and should play no constitutive role in the remote observer's assessing whether an artifact's appearance is the product of aesthetically motivated replications. Assessing the aesthetic merit of an artifact assumes a familiarity with what aspects are to be paid attention to or ignored: hovering with one's gaze over the surface texture may be essential for the appreciation of William Turnbull's Cycladic-inspired sculptures, but was that kind of attention mandated by a Cycladic figure (fig. 4)?[38] The fact that one finds such an attentive behavior merited under present circumstances cannot establish a judgment by setting that would treat the figure as a member of a series of objects formatted to invite this mode of attention. As if the simplicity of form, the absence of embellishment or paint (in their present state anyway),[39] and the exposure of medium that Cycladic figures share with Turnbull's sculptures were employed by their makers to achieve the sort of archaeological sublime characteristic of his sculptural primitivism.[40] One thing is unavoidable, however: a judgment by setting cannot but rely on the aesthetic archaeologist's sensory apparatus to pick out the format replications. The following

36. For example, it is compatible with a certain understanding of *style* that equivocates between, on the one hand, form as a morphological configuration harbouring aesthetic aspectivity requiring a properly attuned observer (judge-by-intrinsic-merit) and, on the other hand, form as a morphological configuration open to the kind of *etic* analysis that is casually and non-controversially carried out in archaeological contexts when inferring from artefact structure to instrumental function (akin to judgment-by-setting). Under such an understanding of style, aesthetic archaeology (indeed, any archaeology) cannot but involve aesthetic criticism, with all the anxiety that comes with it. See Neer, "Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Autumn 2005): 1–26.

37. For a discussion of an externalist position in aesthetics, see Peter Lamarque, "Palaeolithic Cave Painting: A Test Case for Transculturalist Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics and Rock Art*, pp. 21–35.

38. On Turnbull's archaeological inspirations, see Renfrew, *Figuring It Out*, pp. 70–75.

39. See Elizabeth A. Hendrix, "Painted Early Cycladic Figures: An Exploration of Meaning and Context," *Hesperia* 72 (Oct.–Dec. 2003): 405–46.

40. See Renfrew's unjustified claim that Turnbull's Cycladic-inspired works "draw upon the same sense of form, the same pleasure in simplification" (Renfrew, *Figuring It Out*, p. 75).

FIGURE 4. William Turnbull, Mask, 1993, bronze. © 2021, ProLitteris, Zurich.

will thus be devoted to drawing preliminary conclusions as to the nature of an aesthetic analysis of remote artifacts.

Towards an Aesthetic Archaeology

An aesthetic archaeology understood as aesthetic criticism under remote conditions can never completely escape the gravity field of the vicious circle exemplified by Getz-Gentle's work: a remote artifact or a series thereof is classified as having a particular aesthetic mandate because it strikes the critic/archaeologist as sharing with familiar artifacts such traits that signal in the latter, familiar kind the mandate to engage her or his aesthetic responses in a certain register. But the similarity is derived from the potential to merit aesthetic responses that it is supposed to establish. To break out of the circle, the critic/archaeologist applies her or his preferred form of the suspicion principle by treating her or his aesthetic judgments as at best crude approximations of the merited response or as suggesting that an artifact has been endowed with some, although unspecifiable, aesthetic mandate[41] or as having no heuristic import at all. In all these cases, the only heuristic means of accessing remote artifacts' aesthetic mandate that comes under consideration is that of the remote observer's aesthetic appreciation. The critic/archaeologist thus remains under the spell of the antinomy between the archaeologist's heuristic dependence on her or his perceptual responses and their unreliability in revealing remote artifacts' aesthetic merits.

To escape the gravitational pull of the vicious circle is to come to terms with the fact that the aesthetic archaeologist can attain only an indirect aesthetic insight.[42] She or he cannot embark on the mission to merge her aesthetic horizon

41. For a certain kind of optimist, for example, already the fact that one can identify marks of human involvement in an object and that one sees these marks as contributing to one's appreciation makes one a reliable judge of whether the artefact has been endowed with an aesthetic mandate. Subjective ignorance or objective inaccessibility of artistic context would thus be taken to be leveraged by the fact that, typically, an artefact "can be seen to be art by those ignorant of the context in which it is produced" (Davies, "First Art and Art's Definition," p. 27); it is because certain objects are "suggestive of aesthetic sensibilities in their humanoid makers" that one is supposed to ascribe to them the "seeking [of] aesthetic effects" even if one has no further access to the artefact's cultural settings (Davies, *The Artful Species*, pp. 46, 2). For the optimist, to lack such access does not imply that its appreciation is completely isolated from any context whatsoever. It implies, rather, that one has access only to such context that is commonly accessible to any human being regardless of their cultural background; see Davies, "First Art and Art's Definition," p. 31.

42. Typically, in philosophical aesthetics, the debate about indirect aesthetic knowledge is framed as one on the permissibility of acquiring justified aesthetic beliefs on expert testimony and without first-hand experience; in aesthetic archaeology, the tables turn and what is at stake is the permissibility of acquiring justified aesthetic beliefs based on first-hand experience but without access to either first- or second-hand expertise. See Robert Hopkins, "How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony," *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (Mar. 2011): 138–57.

with that of the remote culture for the plain reason that the culture is indissolubly remote: she or he cannot hope to internalize the behaviors and customs surrounding the artifacts; and in cases of preliterate societies she or he can be even less sure that what she or he observes has been endowed with any aesthetic mandate. As a result, the archaeologist must give up hope of recovering many aesthetic practices that are subtle and context dependent; they remain invisible under the conditions of remoteness. Aesthetic archaeology must therefore narrow its focus to classes of artifacts whose production was associated with a strong incentive to make their visual salience at least partly context independent by making the visual encounter with them as close to unavoidable as possible on repeated occasions and perhaps in varying contexts.[43] The very appearance of such objects often marks their authoritative presence.[44] For example, the Cycladic figures' pronounced symmetry, their figurative content, the fact that many of them have been found at cemeteries and places likely used for rituals, and the energy and skill required to produce them strongly suggest that they were meant to command attention.[45] The social import of such artifact kinds is fundamental: as objects of visual authority, such artifacts are well suited to serve as visual objects of authority.

The idea that values of remote spatial art are first and foremost understood as values of authority, not of form, is a key, if still underappreciated feature, of David Summers's (Kubler inspired) postformalism. In contrast to someone like Getz-Gentle, who relies on her sensitivity to form to recover aesthetic mandates, Summers suggests that recovering remote art's meaning should focus on its conditions of presentation, indeed, its format. On his account, the fundamental data we have access to are artifacts' coordinates with respect to the necessarily anthropocentric space we share with their makers. But the conditions of such "real space[s]" are always put in service of a human praxis; they shape and in turn assume a "decorum," a "familiarity with formats, circumstances and conventions."[46] A distinctive feature of Summers's recovery of art's meaning is its focus on purposeful configuration. Configuration is an *evident disposition to an end*; it is a mark of function, that is, a common purpose that informs the shaping of the artifact. We can make an educated guess vis-à-vis general function more reliably than with respect to culturally specific purpose that is dependent on local context (that is, it is easier to identify an

43. See John Hyman, "Vision and Power," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (May 1994): 246.

44. See Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 68–72.

45. For an up-to-date presentation of their archaeology, see *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context*, ed. Marisa Mathari, Renfrew, and Michael Boyd (Havertown, Pa., 2016).

46. David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York, 2003), pp. 43, 42.

artifact as a vessel rather than as a communion cup).[47] What is left out of this abstraction to configuration, the artifactual surplus, becomes essential to art-historical reconstruction as Summers understands it—and which is, I want to claim, essential to aesthetic recovery as well.[48] This surplus is arbitrary in the sense that it is inevitably subject to local group and individual conditions of presentation—there is no such thing as a pure instantiation of a configuration. A local stylistic norm acquires social significance as an authoritative pattern of production (*is* becomes *ought*), and it is integrated into a shared second nature as part of a decorum of making, using, and valuing things. Eventually, it can become expressive of the whole group and its values.[49] Arbitrariness leads to local norms that in turn lead to authority, a formula governing the relative stability, but also variation, of local instances of a configuration. Values of spatial art are thus first and foremost understood as values of authority, not of formality.

Following the same postformalist logic, aesthetic archaeology turns to artifactual surplus to recover aesthetic mandates. The basic data set for both the postformalist art historian as well as the aesthetic archaeologist becomes not the form of an artifact but what gets replicated with and in an artifact as part of a local configuration series—a position postformalism inherits from Kubler. As a fellow postformalist comments:

> The serial making of assemblages (or environments) of things in real spaces in history is [for Summers] the elementary (quasi-Kublerian) datum of our archaeology, not the form of the artwork as put into it by a spatializing sensibility said to precede the agent's experience in the world and especially the agent's experience of socially shaped topography—of particular cultural "places" in "real space."[50]

Unavoidably, the class of features central to aesthetic archaeology will be those procedures of commanding attention that are largely independent of social context (the *socially shaped topography*) so that the archaeologist can rely on her or his sensory apparatus to recognize them, such as replicated sensory attractors like luster and symmetrical shape. These are what

47. For a relevant theoretical context, see Alison Wylie, "The Reaction against Analogy," in *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology* (Berkeley, 2002), pp. 136–53.

48. A victim of the anxiety analyzed in this article, Summers sees no relevance of aesthetic inquiry, which he understands in the sense of a parochial Kantian-derived aesthetic criticism, for his theorizations of global art. See Summers, *Real Spaces*, p. 36.

49. See ibid., pp. 63–66. See also Polly Wiessner, "Style and Social Information in Kalahari San Projectile Points," *American Antiquity* 48 (Apr. 1983): 257–58.

50. Whitney Davis, "What Is Post-Formalism? (Or, *Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte*)," *nonsite.org* 7 (2012): nonsite.org/article/what-is-post-formalism-or-das-sehen-an-sich-hat-seine-kunstgeschichte

Mohan Matthen calls "*primary sensory attractors.*"[51] It is arguably the failure to distinguish between the presence of primary attractors and their embedded "qualitative evaluation" that is the source of Renfrew's enigma, the frustrated need to say more about the overlap between his fascination with the Cycladic figures and their original public status: the overlap is not one of aesthetic sensitivities but rather that of a general susceptibility to certain means of commanding attention.[52] But this susceptibility alone says very little about whether the Cycladic figures possessed an aesthetic mandate and if so, of what kind, as to command attention is not yet to command aesthetic attention, that is, attention to mode of delivery. The fact that the Louvre figure strikes Getz-Gentle as elegant and that she identifies this merit with its "continuous arc" cannot be evidence of a mandate to appear elegant; although it may help her realize that the supposedly elegant feature makes the figure comparatively more schematic, less descriptive, and thus more prone to being treated as a pictographic symbol.[53] This would, at least, be the direction of inquiry taken by the aesthetic archaeologist: first to determine instrumental structures and then to see whether the artifactual surplus offers any symptoms of aesthetic mandates.

Symptoms suggesting the mandate to attend to artifacts' mode of presentation would arguably include redundancy of primary attractors at the expense of other plausible uses,[54] ostensible "denial, distortion and erasure" of functional or traditional formats, stark variations in technical detail, or little signs of wear.[55]

The question of whether procedures of commanding attention could have plausibly been aesthetically motivated—whether they make sense as introduced in order to make the particular artifacts more suitable to merit attention to their mode of presentation—will of necessity be of a speculative nature relying on a messy mixture of indirect evidence, assessments of structural and formatting properties, and the researcher's aesthetic beliefs (as opposed to proper aesthetic judgments). The messy nature of the heuristic is,

51. Mohan Matthen, "Play, Skill, and the Origins of Perceptual Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (Apr. 2015): 174. They include "pattern (symmetry, continuation, occlusion, enclosure, repetition, the 'line of beauty,' etc.), colour, and pictorial representation" (p. 174).

52. Morphy, "Aesthetics across Time and Space," p. 53.

53. See Summers, *Real Spaces*, pp. 346–50.

54. See Currie, "The Master of the Masek Beds," pp. 9–31.

55. Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (London, 2010), p. 97. See also Mary M. Voigt, "Çatal Höyük in Context: Ritual at Early Neolithic Sites in Central and Eastern Turkey," in *Life in Neolithic Farming Communities: Social Organization, Identity, and Differentiation*, ed. Ian Kuijt (New York, 2000), pp. 253–93, and Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines*, pp. 112–55. Note that the mixing up together of aesthetic and ludic functions by Voigt and Lesure betrays inadequate appreciation of the nature of the aesthetic mandate.

however, part and parcel of any research into all (not just aesthetic) remote mandates to draw or command visual attention.[56]

It is here that I want to stop, for the task lying ahead has become clear enough and yet too large to embark on within this article's space. What is required is a new aesthetics, no less, an aesthetics that revolves around deriving indirect evidence from an artifact's formatting rather than around the appreciation of its aesthetic attributes. Such an aesthetics would focus on the practice of extracting patterns of attracting and commanding visual attention as they inscribe themselves at least in part in the appearance of artifacts, taking the burden of reenacting appreciative mental states sensitive to particular aesthetic values once and for all off the aesthetic archaeologist's shoulders.

56. See Morphy, "Aesthetics across Time and Space," pp. 54–55. For a sense of what would a full acknowledgement of this messy nature amount to methodologically, see Whitney Davis, *General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 2011). For the same reasons as Summers, Davis has been reluctant to associate his work with aesthetics; see p. 4. However, his recent comments suggest that he might have been an aesthetic archaeologist all along; see Davis, "Responses to Stejskal and Hönes," *Estetika* 54, no. 2 (2017): 277–85.