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# Primitivism and humanist teleology in art history around 1900

Susanne Leeb



Figure 1 Heinrich Morin, *Die Kunst der Tiere*, in: Karl Woermann, *Die Geschichte der Kunst aller Völker und Zeiten*, Vol. 1, 1900, plate 1

The following text deals primarily with the writings of two art historians: Karl Woermann und Ernst Grosse and how they conceived of art. Their texts circle around fundamental divisions: the difference between animals and human beings, between peoples of nature and peoples of culture, between primitive tribes and civilized societies. These divisions are symptomatic of notions of art around 1900. Under the influence of ethnology as a discipline and within the period of colonialism, art history opened itself towards the integration of the arts of non-European people. Under which conditions, with which terms, which considerations or hierarchies – in short: under which epistemological conditions did Non-European art become part of European knowledge? Posing this question, one is confronted with some contradictions: art was considered to be the marker which divides mankind from the animal kingdom. Humanist teleology, i.e. the belief in the necessity and capability of human development as a fundamental division from lower species provided the argument for this distinction. But exactly this very same teleology also implied that even if art was considered as common to mankind, not all people were regarded as equal. The following deals with the place of art of non-European peoples within the science of art, aesthetics and art history around 1900.

## 1. Allochronic logic

The fact that at around 1900 the art of non-European people, especially in Africa, Oceania, Polynesia or Australia, was regarded as primitive, did not simply lead to the widely researched primitivisms in European art. But also the primitive was the mode under which these arts were discussed *as art at all*. The notion of the primitive around 1900 can be characterised by at least two aspects numerated by Johannes Fabian in his groundbreaking book *Time and the Other. How Anthropology makes its Objects* from 1983: the primitive is a Western, spatiotemporal category of thought and it served as an instrument of domination in the course of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Fabian referred to anthropology the same applies to (art) history writing, if we follow Fabian or authors like Valentin Mudimbe.<sup>2</sup> Both state that colonialism should not just be seen in direct relation to the possession of colonies since the 1880s or as a concrete expression of colonial thinking, but also as an epistemological configuration in the way knowledge about other cultures was produced. Ulrich Pfisterer in his text on 'Origins and Principles of World Art History: 1900 (and 2000)' wants to free late nineteenth-century art historical studies from the 'banner of "postcolonial studies"', so as to draw a 'more complex picture' using cultural

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Fabian: 'A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the 'primitive'; it thinks, observes, studies in terms of the primitive. *Primitive* being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object of Western thought.' Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> See Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

anthropology and psychology.<sup>3</sup> Whereas certainly cultural anthropology and psychology, like folk psychology, are very important for art history around 1900, I would like to argue that they are not an alternative to postcolonial thinking, since they were deeply affected by the epistemological hierarchy which postcolonial scholars like Fabian or Mudimbe have been pointing out. The folk psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, for example, adopted the then standard history of development, thinking that mankind developed from a primitive stage towards humanity. In his *Völkerpsychologie* (1900–1920) he defended a linear history of progress, according to which humanity developed in a sequence from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘totemist’ age, to the ‘heroes and Gods,’ and finally reached ‘humanity.’ ‘Primitive man’ here is the wild man: but the ‘wild man is essentially an animal with some human qualities.’<sup>4</sup>

Having examples like this in mind, one can counter postcolonial studies by stating that it was the constructions of history and concepts of art and value in art history that classified Western culture as inherently more valuable, placing the arts of other cultures and societies on the level of pre-art, primitive art, or art’s beginnings. Here, art history conforms to the allochronic logic discussed by Fabian, which basically consists in denying conevalness to Europe’s ‘others’: [...] this allochronic logic [savage, barbaric, civilized, S.L.] identified and constituted late-nineteenth-century ‘savages’ as ‘survivals’ – inhabitants of more or less ancient states of cultural development. At the same time, anthropology’s allochronism established a “civilized” West as the pinnacle of universal human progress, an argument that helped to legitimize various imperialist projects.<sup>5</sup> According to Fabian and Mudimbe the interest in ‘primitive’ artefacts was defined by a historical thinking that had already postulated the pastness, pre-historicity, or the inferiority of the Other. ‘The “most primitive” no longer exist . . . But there is a series of lower peoples that allow us to conclude what preceded them on the lowest levels . . . The primitive hunting peoples in Australia, America, and Africa [offer] good material,’<sup>6</sup> according to the ethnologist Leo Frobenius in *Der Ursprung der Afrikanischen Kultur* (1898). Analogously, in *Questions of Style* the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl writes: ‘Since, in the spirit of the modern natural sciences, we consider it justified to see peoples of nature as rudimentary survivals of the human race from periods of culture long past, in this light the geometric ornamentation of today’s peoples of nature appears to be a historically long-overcome phase in the development of the decorative arts, and thus of great historical importance.’<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Aby Warburg’s trip to the Hopi followed an allochronic logic, for he hoped to be able ‘to understand the evolution from primitive paganism, through the highly-developed pagan

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Pfisterer, ‘Origins and Principles of World Art History – 1900 (and 2000)’, in Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds, *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, 69–89, here 70.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Wundt, *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie. Grundlinien einer Psychologischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit*, Leipzig: Kröner, 1912, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Frobenius, *Der Ursprung der Afrikanischen Kultur*, Berlin: Borntraeger, 1898, 350.

<sup>7</sup> Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen, Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin: Siemens, 1893, 17.

culture of classical antiquity, down to modern civilized man.’<sup>8</sup> Whereas Primitivism as an artistic phenomenon has widely been researched as an appearance within colonialism, the same cannot be said about the writing of art history and aesthetics and their epistemological assumptions.

## 2. Art as a species characteristic

When in the nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnology and art history went in search of the origins of art – in part as an ensemble – they were interested primarily in clarifying the question of what prehistorical or ‘primitive’ artefacts said about the history of art and about a supposed fundamental human capacity for art. Linking the history of art with the history of humanity implied declaring art a parameter with which the state of development of human beings can be measured. Art became a species characteristic; that is, it had to differ from the art of animals and became the criteria for the distinction between man and animal. This of course entails that it is at all possible to speak of ‘art’ in relation to the animal kingdom. That animals might have an art at all came into consideration with anthropology in the eighteenth century, when art was explained as the outcome of a certain ‘art drive’ or ‘drive to decorate’ (*Schmucktrieb*) which was also found in the realm of animals.

The division of mankind and animal was widely discussed in the field of aesthetics from the eighteenth century on, and is partly to do with the equation of the senses with reason. With Baumgarten the once inviolable line between materialist-mechanistic sensual capacities and reason was questioned. This was a prerequisite for the formation of aesthetics to the extent that it brings ‘lower,’ more sensual capacities as intellectual capacities into play. As an intellectual capacity the aesthetic was directed against a materialist-mechanical understanding of the sensual.<sup>9</sup> As Christoph Menke shows this was the foundation of another kind of aesthetics: one less understood as a part of philosophy in the sense of an *analogon rationis* like in Baumgarten, but understood as anthropology. With Johann Gottfried Herder aesthetics became, according to Menke, anthropological, since he viewed humanity from ‘its beginnings, foundations and ‘abysses,’ understood either as plant or animal like.’<sup>10</sup> In aesthetics, from Herder to Friedrich Schiller, there was a constant struggle over the line separating human and animal, which even continues today.<sup>11</sup> In his *Treaties on the Origin of Language* from 1772, Herder denied that the art drive of animals, primarily an instinctual necessity for breeding, has anything to do

<sup>8</sup> Aby Warburg and William Mainland, ‘A Lecture on Serpent Ritual’, *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2:4, April 1939, 277–292, here 277.

<sup>9</sup> See for a general survey Friedhelm Solms, *Disciplina Aesthetica. Zur Frühgeschichte der Ästhetischen Theorie bei Baumgarten und Herder*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Christoph Menke, ‘Subjektivität’, in Karlheinz Barck, Martin Fontius and Dieter Schlenstedt, eds, *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in Sieben Bänden*, Vol. 5, Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2003, 734–786, here 752–53. See by the same author, *Kraft. Ein Grundbegriff Ästhetischer Anthropologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010, (Orig. *L’Aperto*, 2002).

with the art of human beings.<sup>12</sup> His negation shows that this question was at stake. He attributes to the higher animals a similarity to mankind, only to then draw a line: 'The most sensual state of humanity is still human . . . and the least sensual state of the animals is still animal.'<sup>13</sup> The line separating the two is the possibility of self-determination: Herder considers the human being as a lacking being that defines itself by its own activity. The human being needs to perfect himself, i.e. follows a humanist teleology, because he lacks the instincts and the practical reason of animals. Herder here posited a unified drive that courses through everything vegetable, animal, and human, until all comes together 'in man's capacity for reason, freedom, and humanity.'<sup>14</sup> The humanist teleology, according to which the (divine) nature of the human still needs to be realized, insures that there is a 'constantly increasing perfection' of each individual and entire peoples.<sup>15</sup> This is the key characteristic of all humanist teleology, which alongside Herder also defines Friedrich Schiller's notion of human becoming by way of aesthetic education. For the art and culture of non-European societies, Herder's humanist teleology entailed a relative recognition of their various cultures, but only as a lower possibility of the human. In Herder we find a 'negative correlation between sensual perception and the capacity for abstraction'.<sup>16</sup> That means the more sensual people were considered, the lower their capacity for abstraction were supposed to be, as it was the case with "wild people" and animals. According to Herder, African people were less gifted with the capacity for intellectual progress, but more gifted with sensual cognition, capable of a 'sensual animal enjoyment.'<sup>17</sup> Though there was a strict line separating mankind and animals, humanist teleology still established a hierarchy of capacities.

### 3. Karl Woermann and the human/animal divide

Thinking aesthetics from its dark beginnings, and considering the drives and sensuality was increasingly given space in the study of art around 1900. Physiology of the senses (replacing the theory of sensual cognition as in Baumgarten) became a field of studies on its own.<sup>18</sup> Under the influence of Darwinism the line separating the human and animal in the realm of arts and the aesthetic was even more difficult to draw. For the study of art, which saw itself as a 'science' (*Kunstwissenschaft*), (as biology in particular), would provide the criterion for its scientificity in the sense of general laws.

Symptomatic of the search for a line separating the animal from the human in the realm of art is the three-volume compendium of world art *Die Geschichte der*

<sup>12</sup> See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), ed. by Hans-Dietrich Irmscher, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993, esp. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit' (1784), in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, ed. by Wolfgang Pross, Vol. III/1, Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 2002, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Solms, *Disciplina aesthetica*, 138

<sup>17</sup> Herder, 'Ideen zur Philosophie', 229.

<sup>18</sup> For this double genealogy of art history see Regine Prange, *Die Geburt der Kunstgeschichte, Philosophische Ästhetik und Empirische Wissenschaft*, Cologne: Deubner, 2004.

*Kunst aller Völker und Zeiten* by art historian Karl Woermann (1844–1933), who was director of the collection of new masters at Dresden's Royal Painting Gallery. In 1900, he published the first volume, which begins with six prints showing the 'architectural arts' of animals (fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> According to the caption, the illustrations depict the dwelling structures of beavers and harvest mice, a nest colony of the masked weaver, a nest of the warbler and the sparrow, the cross-section of a termite mound, and a bower of the Australian bowerbird.

Woermann, who himself was not sure whether such nests actually belonged to art, based his considerations and conclusions on the history of development. If art begins among primitive peoples, according to Woermann, 'this immediately raises the question of whether in order to arrive at art's genuine beginnings we need not go a step further, and, like primeval history and ethnology, consult natural history as well.'<sup>20</sup> This premise alone reveals the importance of the arts of so-called primitive peoples within the Western system of knowledge, in which numerous non-European societies were classified. Art history, with the aim of distilling the definition of art from its empirical beginnings, follows the logic of a developmental narrative, which assigns supposed 'primitive peoples' to the realm of natural history.

Woermann also explains art by way of an art drive, where sensory perception and pleasure and displeasure are linked, making recourse to physiology necessary. Woermann thus continues:

There is the burning question of whether living beings other than the human being act in the possession of an art drive, whether animals in particular, which often have sharper senses than we and in their wake states and in dreams are subjected to pleasure and suffering just as like ourselves, are truly forever excluded from the earthly paradise of artistic creation and enjoyment (GdK, 2).

If the lines separating the art and sensual capacities of animals are no longer clearly definable, this results in a concept of art that defines creativity as a biological capacity that (other) animals also possess. He refers to the ludic drive (*Spieltrieb*) which has become so prominent for aesthetics with Friedrich Schiller's *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Woermann states that it is 'generally acknowledged' that 'animals and men share the same ludic drive, which some consider to be the primal drive (*Urtrieb*) for exercising art' (GdK, 2).

Though in the end Woermann claims that art is the 'beam of light' which separates man from animal – since animal art is only 'blind natural drive' (*Naturtrieb*) (GdK, 2) – his considerations are symptomatic of the increasing linkage of aesthetics as a former 'theory of the free arts, lower theory of intellectual capacity, art of beautiful thought, art of the analogon of reason' (and thus 'science of sensual

<sup>19</sup> Karl Woermann, *Die Geschichte der Kunst Aller Zeiten und Völker*, Vol. 1: Die Kunst der Vor- und Außerchristlichen Völker, Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1900. Only the images of animals are in this edition. The second edition from 1915 only contains drawings of butterflies, fossils and plants which shall prove the birth of ornament from nature.

<sup>20</sup> Woermann, *Geschichte der Kunst*. In the following as GdK.

knowledge' in Baumgarten's sense),<sup>21</sup> with biological and Darwinist thought. In Woermann, who Alois Riegl would later praise as the 'most modern development',<sup>22</sup> within the discipline of art history an interweaving of aesthetics with Darwinism, positivist psychology, and the physiology of the senses can be revealed.

Woermann was not the only author of his time who dedicated himself to this issue. The art of animals was an active issue in the aesthetic debates around 1900. The Finnish aesthetic theorist Yrjö Hirn, for example, in his book *The Origin of Art* (1900) emphasized that the Aristotelian discovery of the mimetic drive links art to a general animal drive, the 'aesthetic importance of which can scarcely be overestimated.'<sup>23</sup> Hirn named as non-aesthetic factors of the origin of art not only intellectual education and the stimulus to work, but also the seeking of sexual favour, and the effect of magic.<sup>24</sup> The animal drive to adornment thus stands at the start of biological theories of creativity, even when Hirn localizes the 'aesthetic cravings' on the side of humanity. Referring to American architect and neuropsychologist Henry Rutgers Marshall, he emphasized 'that the aesthetic cravings are a "racial" possession of mankind'.<sup>25</sup> Art, according to Hirn, is an *in-born* capacity, as well as an essential characteristic of the 'human race'.

In order to clarify his opening question as to whether the animal structures can be considered art, Woermann, for his part, turned to the British natural historian James Rennie, the Dutch zoologist Pieter Harting, who both wrote on the *Architecture of animals* (1847/1862),<sup>26</sup> and John George Wood, the author of popular books of natural history like *Homes Without Hands. Being a Description of the Habitations of Animals, Classed According to Their Principle of Construction* (London 1892). He also consulted the biologist Ludwig Büchner and his *Aus dem Geistesleben der Tiere oder Staaten und Thaten der Kleinen* (Leipzig 1876), and not least the British animal behaviourist George Romanes, who in his book *Animal Intelligence* (Manchester 1879) observed similar cognitive processes among humans and animals.

Turning to all these writings, Woermann comes to the conclusion that 'it is generally acknowledged that animals share with human beings the drive to play, which some see as a primal drive at the root of art' (GdK, S. 2). Woermann understands art and the drive to play as a 'certain excess of powers after the species-preserving drives are satisfied' (GdK, 2), a 'need for recreation engaged in free

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica, lateinisch-deutsch*, ed. by Dagmar Mirbach, Hamburg: Meiner, 2007, § 1.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Alois Riegl, 'Kunstgeschichte und Universalgeschichte' (1898), in Riegl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, with an afterword by Wolfgang Kemp, Berlin: Mann, 1995, 3–9.

<sup>23</sup> Yrjö Hirn, *Der Ursprung der Kunst*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Hirn, *Der Ursprung der Kunst*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Hirn, *Der Ursprung der Kunst*, 22. Hirn refers to the following books by Henry Rutgers Marshall: *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics*, London: unknown publisher, 1894, and *Aesthetic Principles*, New York and London: Macmillan, 1895.

<sup>26</sup> James Rennie, *Die Baukunst der Tiere*, Stuttgart 1847, and Pieter Harting, *De bouwkunst der dieren*, Groningen: Erven C.M. van Bolhuis Hoitsema, 1862. In 1833 a book by Rennie, *Die Baukunst der Vögel* (Orig. *The Architecture of Birds*, 1831) was translated into German, as was his book on *Die Baukunst der Insekten* (Orig. *Insect Architecture*, 1830), in 1847.



activity' (Ibid.). With such formulations, Woermann adapted concepts from aesthetics, such as 'free playful activity,' borrowing especially from Friedrich Schiller's 'drive to play,' to concepts from natural history. Yet, in Schiller as well, the drive to play is defined by a dual nature and the separation between nature and reason. According to Schiller in his epistolary work *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*,<sup>27</sup> two basic human drives enter into a harmonic unity in play: a sensual drive, also called life drive, based on the 'physical existence of the human being or his sensual nature' (ÄE 12th letter, 47), and the drive to form or shape, which is defined by the laws of reason. Despite all attempts to find a border, Woermann looks for criteria to explain why, despite the massive evidence of the biological construction of the art drive, the art of animals can only be a preliminary level. His reasons are as follows: it is a 'blind natural drive' (GdK, 10) and marked by a 'lack of development' (GdK, 5). For him, it is only free art – that 'beam of light' – which separates human beings from animals in the sense of a species characteristic, and the 'bond' that unites humanity (see GdK, 2, 3).

And yet, humanity united in this way remains hierarchized and divided in the sense of a humanist teleology. He distinguishes between peoples of nature and peoples of culture, referring to the ethnologist and philosopher Ernst Grosse, who in his book *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894) suggested seeking the rudiments of art among the 'natural peoples,' who were according to him living in socioeconomic conditions similar to those prevailing at the dawn of human culture. Grosse saw ethnology as essential for art history; *Die Anfänge der Kunst* is the first German language treatment of what was then called 'primitive art.' Accordingly, Woermann included these arts in his compendium. 'The art history of the present cannot neglect to trace out the beginnings of art among the peoples of nature and the prehistoric primeval peoples' (GdK, 1). Since Grosse had suggested that art historians should look among these peoples, Woermann looked ever more eagerly to ethnology and the primal and prehistory of humanity. Woermann sums up: 'And only now does art history have the right to say that it encompasses the art of humanity' (Ibid.).

Despite the universalist claim, in Woermann the arts are divided into layers, where the line separating human being and animal is shifted to the distinction between peoples of nature and peoples of Western culture. Due to its 'anonymity,' its 'religiosity,' and 'simplicity of form,' and its 'ornamentality,' Woermann found 'primitive' art not comparable to the 'far more developed' art form of so-called 'individual' artists of Western culture, which for him was equated to individuality, secularity, and high culture. At the same time, Woermann sees the growing interest in prehistory as evidence that the beginnings of free art had manifested themselves in Europe in particular; that is, the art of the peoples of nature was ultimately not to be placed on the same level as that of the European diluvial period, and 'from its dark depths . . . with magic shine of the first beam of a real, free, art, created for its own end.' (GdK, 8) In this way, not only is 'free art' paralleled with the emergence of humanity and projected back to the Paleolithic, but at the same time its origins are Europeanized. Prehistorical finds thus remain subordinate to the European-

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795), with remarks by Rudolf Steiner and an introduction and afterword by Heinz Zimmermann, Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2005. Abbreviated in the following to ÄE.

Greek heritage. 'World art' projects like *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* expand their focus to include artefacts from the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, but are united under the Greek roof of the *Propyläen* with the art of Europe. The *Propyläen* are an etymological and epistemological threshold through which this art becomes the foundation of the art of Europe. Female figures from the late Palaeolithic are accordingly baptized 'Venus,' like the 'Venus of Willendorf' or the 'Venus of Brassempouy.'

If Woermann initially focused on the anthropological difference that set man apart from the animal kingdom, he also uses all sorts of arguments to secure the higher value of Western art. The division nature/culture follows the humanist teleology in connection to what Fabian diagnosed as allochronism.

#### 4. Peoples of nature and culture

The distinction between 'peoples of nature' and 'peoples of culture' can be considered one of the most important criteria when discussing the arts of other cultures and societies as surmounted, prior stages of art, or as 'primeval,' and thus not yet corrupted by civilization. In the German-speaking world, the distinction first manifests itself with the entry 'culture' in Karl Biedermann's *Staatslexikon* from 1860, where the highest development was assigned not to Europe as a whole, but to Germany in particular. 'Nature' is here defined as the 'physical universe,' governed by blind, necessary forces: 'culture' in contrast is everything that is created by the higher mental powers of humanity. Language is considered the prerequisite for all culture, which in turn is the prerequisite for progress and history, while cultures without writing are removed from history. The contribution sees humanity's 'lowest' and 'highest' achievements as belonging to culture. Yet the distinction between peoples of nature and peoples of culture remains. According to this concept of progress, peoples of nature, which were considered undeveloped or underdeveloped, are placed on the lowest level of culture. The most advanced peoples, in contrast, according to Biedermann, a fervent nationalist, are the Germans.<sup>28</sup> In 1896, the philosopher Alfred Vierkandt further cemented the distinction in his book *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker* by undertaking additional classifications, distinguishing between peoples of 'full' and 'half culture', whereby the latter are those that only left a state of barbarism recently. Vierkandt, who sought to subject 'the most various levels of culture, that we find on the face of the earth, to an interpretation of psychological character and segmentation',<sup>29</sup> refers to authors that mobilize what George Mosse in his history of racism sees as so momentous, namely, the notion that humanity develops from the sensual, the concrete, to the abstract, now linked to specific cultures. Gustave d'Eichthal, according to Vierkandt, had 'demonstrated' in 1847 that the peoples of culture were the only ones in possession of free science. Karl von den Steinen, a German physicist, ethnographer of Brazilian and Marquian indigenous people quoted by Vierkandt, in turn attested to a higher level of sensuality within the peoples of

<sup>28</sup> Here after Woodruff Donald Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany 1840–1920*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 69–70.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker. Ein Beitrag zur Socialpsychologie*, Leipzig: Duncker und Humboldt, 1896, 1.

nature, while peoples of culture have the advantage of the 'capacity of forming abstract concepts'.<sup>30</sup> Other advocates of this view include Gustav Klemm, whose writings were received by Gottfried Semper, Herbert Spencer, Wilhelm Wundt, or Tito Vignoli, who in turn had an influence on the thought of Aby Warburg, by way of the reception of the historian Karl Lamprecht.

At issue is always the capacity to form abstract concepts and the distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary acts of will. Alfred Vierkandt refers to Tito Vignoli's view, as expressed in *Mythus und Wissenschaft* (1890), of *homo duplex* as the being that reflects,<sup>31</sup> the human being as the only living being that not only eats, like the animals, but *wants* to eat. Self-consciousness and the control of the will here follow an upward line, from the reflex, to drive-like acts of will, to acts of will, but can also turn downward at any time, when the 'act of consciousness has been obliterated.'<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, Vierkandt included as 'full cultures' the ancient Greeks and Western European peoples of the modern age; 'half-cultures,' in his view, were the 'medieval and Roman half-cultures,' 'nomadic peoples of the deserts and steppes of the old world,' and 'sedentary peoples that enjoy ordered, stable political and economic relations, like the Sudanese, Oriental, and pre-Columbian American states.'<sup>33</sup> Vierkandt's discussion also includes a repudiation of Ernst Grosse, who inadmissibly minimized the distinction between the educated Arab and an educated European.<sup>34</sup> As Karl-Heinz Kohl summarizes, according to Vierkandt, the 'peoples of nature lacked the will-driven capacity of endurance that enabled "full peoples of culture", that is, the Europeans, to subject the entire planet to their rule, while the "peoples of nature" were condemned to remain without a history'.<sup>35</sup> With such arguments, colonialism was legitimized in terms of natural history.

A similar model of levels, in this case wildness, domestication, and freedom, was proposed a few years previously by the cultural historian Gustav Klemm, who, in contrast to the idealist authors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, argued in terms of race theory in his *Allgemeinen Cultur-Geschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig 1843).<sup>36</sup>

Klemm had built up a collection of data on material cultures and social behaviour from across the globe: information taken from travelogues. In his treatise, he divided peoples into active and passive, classifying the Germans among the active. His theory of levels of wildness from domestication to freedom was intended to 'prove' the natural superiority of the Germans as the most active people of all. Accordingly, within German ethnology and anthropology his model of levels was taken up with its developmental historical impulse to create concepts of cultural

<sup>30</sup> Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Regina Mahlmann, *Homo Duplex. Zur Zweifelhait des Menschen bei Georg Simmel*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1983.

<sup>32</sup> Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Vierkandt, *Naturvölker und Kulturvölker*, 11, Fn. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Ethnologie. Die Wissenschaft vom Kulturell Fremden*, Munich: Beck, 2000 (1993), 22.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture*, 60.

superiority and inferiority, and for a long time would serve as one of its central theorems.<sup>37</sup>

## 5. Ernst Grosse and the nature/culture divide

Ernst Grosse (1862–1927) is the author that Woermann quoted when looking for the ‘basics’.<sup>38</sup> Grosse also took a strongly biological view of art, and linked it to the humanist teleology of aesthetics since Herder and Schiller. He studied art and artefacts of cultures without writing about their social functions; the equation of the lack of a writing system with a lack of history was according to German philosophy, the gateway for primitivization.<sup>39</sup>

Three years before *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894), Grosse published a long article that was basically dedicated to the relationship between aesthetics and ethnology; at first it praised the amazing productivity that ethnology had evidenced for the ‘solution of problems in the humanities’ in ethics, the history of law, state theory, and the philosophy of religion. This ‘reticence’ on the part of aesthetics is for him ‘virtually inconceivable on first glance.’<sup>40</sup>

Grosse is also interested in deducing things about humanity from art’s beginnings and to formulate a unified concept of art for all humanity. He defined the aesthetic drive as the common feature. Every form of art activity, every ‘cultural particularity’ is based on the same principle: a unified artistic drive that is only realized differently according to various cultures of production (hunters, gatherers, farmers). At the same time, with the concept of the ‘ludic’ or ‘play drive’ he retains a vocabulary from the theory of aesthetics taken from Friedrich Schiller. The ludic drive is for Grosse a ‘purposeless capacity for the aesthetic confirmation of physical and mental capacities . . . and this art drive is combined in various forms with the “mimetic drive.”’<sup>41</sup>

Grosse’s orientation based on evolutionist concepts and the demand that the results of ethnology need to be accounted for are marked by an effort to establish its own scientificity. He is interested in an empirical explanation of aesthetics, with which he can turn against the ‘speculative philosophy’ that has exerted an ‘unfortunate influence’ on all science and scholarship (EuÄ, 396). That is, he attempts to ‘prove’ the speculative assumptions of aesthetics which only theoretically claim that there are universal laws in the realm of aesthetics, but which

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture*, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Grosse was, among other things, honorary curator of the archaeological and ethnographical university collections of Freiburg, Germany between 1889 and 1905. To learn more about Grosse see Wilfried van Damme, ‘Ernst Grosse and the Birth of the Anthropology of Aesthetics’, *Anthropos*, vol. No 107, 2012, 497–509. Wilfried van Damme, ‘Not What You Expect: The Nineteenth-Century European Reception of Australian Aboriginal Art’, *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift / Journal of Art History*, 81:3, February 2012, 133–149.

<sup>39</sup> This connection between writing, reason and history since the Hegel is the basic thesis of Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

<sup>40</sup> Ernst Grosse, ‘Ethnologie und Ästhetik’, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, vol. No 15, 1881, 392–417, here 392. Abbreviated in the following to EuÄ.

<sup>41</sup> Ernst Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst*, Freiburg and Leipzig: Mohr, 1894, 294. Abbreviated in the following to AdK.

are not able to prove them. The laws which 'reign the artistic production' can only be found by 'comparative studies between the art and culture of different times and peoples' (EuÄ, 393).

For his comparative studies Grosse refers to several authors from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who, in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, had already in 1719 raised the essential question of how the developmental differences in art among various peoples can be explained, answering this question by referring to the theory of climate. Grosse also referred to Herder. He asserts that Herder followed with emphasis the idea of a comparative consideration of the art and in particular the poetry of all peoples, even if he did 'not yet sufficiently honour the aesthetic feelings and productions of the less developed races' (EuÄ, 395). He criticized the natural science approaches of his period, like those of Hermann von Helmholtz and Gustav Fechner, which he otherwise saw in a positive light, because the objects they studied 'exclusively belong to Western European cultural circles; they are all especially directed to our taste' (EuÄ, 400–401). These were precisely the questions that interested him: is there a general law of development; are the beginnings of art the same in all cultures; 'are there generally applicable, objective conditions for aesthetic feeling' (EuÄ, 404)? This needed to be proven:

When one sees that essentially the same skills among all peoples on a primitive layer of culture, no matter what anthropological type they might belong to, the same social institutions, the same notions, it seems at least to us, who are convinced of the closest dependence of artistic activity from the dependence of artistic activity on the other life activities, that the conclusion is unavoidable that the beginnings of art were everywhere more or less the same (EuÄ, 414–415).

While in 'Ethnologie und Ästhetik' this remains a hypothesis, it is further elaborated in *Die Anfänge der Kunst*. In his overview of the beginnings of art, he conforms with the narrative of evolutionist history, since the 'beginnings' are among other things engraved bones from the Stone Age, bird head carvings on the canoes of the Papua, or ornaments on Australian shields.

Again, the question is posed: on the basis of what notion of 'art' do these different artifacts seem to be comparable? For Grosse, they are included in the category of the ornament, which, in his view, represents the first level of art. Simply by being named 'ornament' and 'beginning of art,' his objects of study are seamlessly included in European concepts of classification. To find the general laws of human development, Grosse not only looked at ornamentation, but 'all kinds' of aesthetic creation: cosmetics, sculpture, dance, poetry, and music. He excludes architecture, for Grosse does not see architecture as art, but as 'function' (see AdK, 292). In his view, cosmetics and ornamentation as initial arts were subject to a logic of development from the simple to the complex. Only if one understands the '101 of nature' can one turn to 'higher mathematics' (AdK, 21). The dimension of scientificity rather than primarily a comparatist interest led Grosse to the study of the 'wild,' which could be instructive on the development of 'aesthetic feelings' (EuÄ, 398) that for him can essentially be summed up as desire and displeasure.

In Grosse, however, this leads to the suspension of qualitative differences between the higher and lower arts, the difference between which could only be measured quantitatively, arriving at a unified concept of art for the 'art of all times' (AdK, 293). In the face of sceptics, Grosse introduces a negative definition: it could be shown that the figures on Australian shields are the marks of their owners or tribes; but this does not show that they are 'not artworks.' Instead, it would be inexplicable 'if they were not' (Adk, 23).

The task of this form of aesthetics consisted in mediating between the freedom of art and a biologically understood drive. Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* were a common reference for that mediation. Grosse wrote his doctoral thesis in philosophy on Spencer. In *Principles of Psychology* Spencer equates the artistic drive with the ludic drive, which he defines biologically as an effect of excess energy; thus he replaced Friedrich Schiller's idealistic concept of freedom with a biological term. Grosse adopted Spencer's assumption of a primordial ludic and mimetic drive, but he explained any development in the arts and mankind as a struggle for survival, not as the 'overflow of energy'.

Other authors adopted Spencer's theory that the ludic drive—and this means also the arts—are a result of an overflow of energy. The consequence of this assumption was that the line was even more difficult to draw, for example for the philosopher and psychologist Karl Groos. For him Schiller's concept of freedom as overflow of energy can still be found in the animal kingdom. As Groos, who also refers to Spencer in part of his book *Die Spiele der Tiere*, emphasizes, the theory of an excess energy was already formulated by Schiller, and he quotes from Schiller's 27<sup>th</sup> letter:

Certainly Nature has given even to the creatures without reason more than the bare necessities of life, and cast a gleam of freedom over the darkness of animal existence. When the lion is not gnawed by hunger and no beast of prey is challenging him to battle, his idle energy creates for itself an object; he fills the echoing desert with this high-spirited roaring, and his exuberant power enjoys life in purposeless display. The insect swarms with joyous life in the sunbeam.<sup>42</sup>

While Spencer does not name Schiller specifically, in the last chapter of his *Principles of Psychology* § 533, which deals with aesthetic feelings, Spencer reports that he came upon a quotation from a German work that explains the origins of aesthetic feelings from the drive to play. He forgot the name of the author, Spencer writes, but for Groos it was clearly Schiller, since the 'theory of the origins of the aesthetic feelings from the play drive is the pivotal point in aesthetic sensation for the Schillerian theory of the beautiful.' (SdT, 3) For Groos in turn, the 'wild' are excluded from this category. Like Darwin, he characterizes body adornment as 'disfigurement' and extensively quotes descriptions of practices of tattooing and body practices from an essay on sexuality and art by Colin Scott: 'Teeth are knocked out or filed like saws,

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, Mineola (N.Y.): Dover Publications, 2004, 133, quoted by Karl Groos, *Die Spiele der Tiere*, Jena 1907 (1896), 1. Abbreviated in the following to SdT.

the head is shaved, hairs plucked out, eyebrows shaved and eyelashes pulled out, the skull is compressed, feet are squeezed and lengthened' (SdT, 7).<sup>43</sup> From these descriptions Groos draws the conclusion that body adornment in the cultures described need not be beautiful at all, so its being included in the category of the beautiful is excluded. 'Aesthetic pleasure of pure life beauty was only achieved by the humans of the highest culture, that is, in Hellas and in the Renaissance came to its fullness.' (SdT, 7) Biological argumentation as the discourse against which the art theories have to prove themselves, serve here not to assert a unity of all arts and cultural techniques, but the special status of European high culture.

Though there are a lot of differences between Woermann, Groos and Grosse all follow a teleology according to which non-European cultures are considered rudimentary. They are placed at the beginnings of art. Or in other words, they become 'part of the European history of expansion, whereby their own history (before and beyond expansion) can no longer become part of *history* in the singular.'<sup>44</sup>

Even if all authors, apart from Woermann's initial insecurity, describe art as a species characteristic of humankind and insist on a distinction or look for criteria of creating difference, due to the humanist teleology there is no limit to distinguishing between levels among the human race. What was once the line separating human being and animal shifts the line separating peoples of nature from peoples of culture. As much as the ensemble of art history, anthropology and ethnology were crucial for the inclusion of the art of non-European people in any consideration, of laws for artistic production and aesthetics, given that all the disciplines were in search of art as a species characteristic, the very same ensemble led to the adoption of hierarchies of arts within art history.

Spencer for example knew how to link the new science of biology with the idealist tradition and its humanist teleology. Against Darwin's negation of human uniqueness, Spencer highly valued the specifically intellectual nature of humanity and the spiritual purpose of human life understood as progress. This idea of progress includes the presumption of increasing social refinement by way of aesthetic sensibility, which according to Spencer is cumulative, progressing from generation to generation, placing European culture and class at the apex of development.<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Outlook

In Grosse and Woermann, we can see that art history around 1900, in search of art's beginnings, adopted a law of progress from cultural studies and ethnology that linked the sensual side of aesthetics with a humanist teleology in the interest of a

<sup>43</sup> Groos refers to Colin Scott, 'Sex and Art', *American Journal of Psychology*, 7:2, January 1896, 181.

<sup>44</sup> Schüttelpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven*, 395.

<sup>45</sup> For the notion of progress in Spencer see: Michael Leja, 'Progress and Evolution at the U.S. World's Fair 1893–1915', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide. A Journal on Nineteenth Century Visual Culture*, 2:2, Spring 2003, Special Issue: The Darwin Effect: <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring03/221-excavating-greece-classicism-between-empire-and-nation-in-nineteenth-century-europe>.

claim to scientificity. This humanist teleology around 1900 is always linked with national and European superiority, whereby anthropological difference between man and animal is shifted toward the difference between nature and culture. With this debate, both writers, as shown by my brief discussion of the peoples of nature and culture, were part of a broader epistemological, that is, anthropological configuration that sought to draw these boundaries.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, it is not a question of ethics to study the 'primitive', but an epistemological question, as Fabian claimed.

In order to decolonize the epistemology of art history it is necessary to investigate under which conditions the art of non-European peoples was included in art history, but at the same time excluded by being considered as not yet high art, pre-art or primitive art. To think of art anthropologically as a manifestation of drives was one of the conditions for the inclusion. But this led to the necessity of at least considering the art of animals as part of art history. On the other hand, humanist teleology, which drew a strict line between these two realms, led to their exclusion from an art history of high or equal art through the hierarchization of the senses and mental capacities.

But it not only concerns art history around 1900 - it has an after life until today. These divisions and hierarchies are implemented in the divisions which structure the museological landscape. The art of peoples of nature were put in ethnographic museums, the art of peoples of culture in art museums. Although the landscape of museums has very much changed since their foundation mostly around 1900 - and ethnographic museums have for the past two decades been reflecting on their function, and on the status of their formerly (partly or mostly) stolen artefacts in colonial times - this fundamental division still prevails: not in terms of peoples of nature and peoples of culture, but between the art and the ethnographic museum.

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<sup>46</sup> The notion of an anthropological configuration was coined by Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses. Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966.