

Remote Art and Aesthetics: An Introduction

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This introduction to the special issue of the British Journal of Aesthetics, 'Remote Art: Engaging with Art from Distant Times and Cultures', presents the notion of art's remoteness in the context of debates about inter-cultural diversity. It discusses the various aspects of remoteness, how it figures in the individual contributions to the issue, and suggests possible avenues for future scholarship.

Art objects often cross boundaries between cultures, gaining, recovering, or transforming their artistic or aesthetic currency in the process. So transplanted, art becomes remote. Its remoteness may or may not colour one's experience of it—one may be intrigued, bewildered, frustrated, or fascinated by the art's remote character. At the same time, one's unfamiliarity with such art also poses the risk that one might misapprehend or misappropriate it. Either way, remote art's philosophical interest resides in the problems it raises with regard to the appreciation and understanding of culturally or temporally distant artefacts. Introducing remoteness to philosophical debates thus offers an opportunity to recast in new terms and rethink the challenges posed by inter-cultural aesthetic diversity.

Problems of diversity and commensurability—particularly of aesthetic judgements—have traditionally been central to aesthetics' concerns, but they predominantly have been treated on an intersubjective rather than inter-cultural level (see, e.g. Young 2017). Happily, the tide has been changing, as topics of trans- or cross-cultural aesthetics—such as matters of trans-cultural appreciation (Gaskell 2018), cultural appropriation (Young 2008; Nguyen and Strohl 2019; Special Issue on Cultural Appropriation 2021), cultural heritage preservation (Matthes, forthcoming), and the dependence of aesthetic values on social practices (Lopes 2018; Matthen 2020; Riggle 2022)—have been gathering attention.

One of the corollaries of recentring the focus on the diversity of aesthetic and artistic communities rather than intersubjective diversity is the need to theorize the distance that separates these communities and how it figures in encounters with objects or practices originating in remote contexts. Although debates about cultural appropriation—that is, the taking or adopting of objects or practices across cultural borders (Young 2008: 5)—have garnered significant attention in recent years, the condition of remoteness that is arguably essential to understanding it has thus far escaped sustained treatment from philosophers of art. With this special issue, we aim to work towards building an adequate philosophical vocabulary that will open up a space for debate and discussion of questions regarding our engagement with art from remote times and cultures. In contrast to earlier discussions about the global

reach of the ‘art’ concept (e.g., [Davies 2000](#); [Dutton 2000](#); [Monseré 2012](#)), the question that preoccupies us here is less what makes remote art *art* and more what issues arise from its remoteness. When and why does art become remote? What obstacles or opportunities does remoteness bring? And how does one overcome the former and take advantage of the latter?

I. Varieties of Remoteness

Art can be remote in more than one sense. In a straightforward way, art is remote if it comes from distant times, places, or cultures. Art’s temporal, spatial, or cultural remoteness becomes philosophically interesting when it is associated with epistemic or normative challenges, that is, when art’s underlying principles, norms, or use context are unfamiliar or when they defy the categories and sensitivities one is used to deploying in art encounters.

Remoteness becomes especially pronounced in cases of ancient or archaic art. Indeed, experts and lay people alike seem to embrace a ‘relativism of distance’ when it comes to such art ([Williams 2006](#): 160–62; [Nannicelli and Bubenik 2024](#)): they often assume that it is intended for an entirely foreign sensitivity whose inner perspective is beyond reach. Perhaps this is why, for example, major museums continue to exhibit ancient Greek vases depicting pederasty, or Aztec depictions of human sacrifices, without causing any public outcry that would otherwise ensue were the art more recent. At the same time, the very reason why museums put these objects on display is that they appeal to us across vast gulfs of time ([Bahrani 2014](#)). As one prominent archaeologist has put it, an ‘enigma’ surrounds the pull of ancient art over us ([Renfrew 2014](#): 14–15): we appreciate these objects despite their perceived remoteness.

Some have argued—often on grounds devised from evolutionary psychology—that no matter how radical the temporal remoteness, we are still likely to register at least some of the aesthetic values or artistic achievements that objects possessed in their original context ([Currie 2011, 2012, 2016](#)). Others object that, while it may be plausible that our attention is drawn to those features of objects that were meant to command attention (e.g., elaborate designs, polished surfaces, pictorial content, or precious material), that does not mean that our responses to these features are the same or even similar ([Lopes et al., 2024](#)). Bronze Age Cycladic marble figures of uncertain purpose are celebrated today for their simple elegance, yet some 130 years ago the archaeologist Paul Wolters did not hesitate to call them ‘repulsively ugly’ ([Hendrix 2003](#): 414, quoting [Wolters 1891](#): 47). Granted, his judgement may have been coloured by his adherence to the Classical canon, but then ours is arguably influenced by the modernist one. If such a dramatic re-evaluation can happen within the span of a century, what can we be justified to say about the figures’ intended reception more than four thousand years ago?

Yet remoteness is not just a matter of encountering art from the deep past. Despite the undeniable existence of globalizing trends in music, gallery art, architecture, cinema, and literature, local aesthetic traditions and artistic subcultures continue to survive, thrive, and come in and out of existence. Some of them—say, urban graffiti tagging cultures—may appear as esoteric to the uninitiated as the strangely distorted Palaeolithic

depictions of humans (Hughes 2024). Or the visibility of certain remote forms of art in popular culture can create a deceiving impression of familiarity. This can lead to cases of ‘aesthetic injustice’—that is, of claiming aesthetic expertise about a practice without acknowledging its participants’ perspective (Nanay 2024a)—as, for example, when the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime paintings were treated as cases of abstract art by the art world in the last century (see Myers 2002; Preziosi and Farago 2012: 52–73).

A different emphasis may be put on the epistemic or normative aspects of art’s remoteness. Understood in epistemic terms, art can be remote when its context of production or use remain unfamiliar or when its content is incomprehensible. Such circumstances may transpire when one simply lacks access to relevant information. However, art can also appear remote because it deploys conceptual schemes (Davidson 1973) and culturally specific mental structures with which one is not intimately familiar (Mortu 2023). This raises the problem of how mutual comprehension is possible across time and between cultures. Epistemic remoteness, understood subjectively, generally translates as a sense of uncertainty, of one’s inability to capture the whole thing (‘I can’t fully comprehend this’). One can thus be uncertain about art forms’ histories, their intended audiences, meaning, as well as public purposes.

Ethnographic and archaeological circumstances dramatize this sense of epistemic remoteness, inviting a reassessment of our understanding of how various forms of life can be ordered. Core concepts and principles that underpin the understanding of natural and social orders—including the ‘social infrastructure of art worlds’ (Lopes et al. 2024: 19)—are brought into question, such as those concerning categories of agency, causality, space and time, animate and inanimate, persons and non-persons (Roepstorff, Niewöhner, and Beck 2010; Alberti et al., 2011; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Mortu, forthcoming).

Understood in its normative aspect, art’s remoteness means unfamiliarity with the evaluative practices that determine its production, content, or reception. While one may be, and often is, attracted aesthetically to remote art objects, it remains an open question to what extent such responses do justice to the merits or demerits that the objects would exhibit to those from within the objects’ cultural orbits (Stejskal 2021, 2023). In such cases, one may be entirely unaware of the divergence between one’s own evaluative responses and those merited by the work in its original context. Or, remoteness may colour one’s experience of the art: one may feel uncertain about its value, incompetent in appreciating it, but also intrigued by its apparent aesthetic merits in spite of its remoteness.

The addition of remoteness to encounters with extant aesthetic or artistic practices generates a certain ethical urgency. What do we owe to remote art objects and their communities? How do we curate or mediate the experiences that such objects are meant to facilitate? Can the aim even be such a mediation? For example, some have claimed that the aim of anthropological museums should not be to facilitate a ‘convergence of experience’, but rather to be about ‘equivocations, about veiled misunderstandings’ because the idea of convergence only consolidates the complacent Western view that non-Western cultures are much like ‘us’ (Taylor 2020). Accordingly, the confrontation with remote cultures that anthropological museums stage should aim to manifest to the public how cultures can radically differ, rather than reduce them to a common denominator. The sense of remoteness would then not be something to overcome, but rather to foreground, while at the same time prompting

audiences to imagine radically different forms of life in which such objects featured (Alpers 1987: 115; Windsor 2023a).

As the last point suggests, remoteness does not have to be experienced as an obstacle. Subjectively experienced remoteness of art, whether temporal or cultural, may be conducive to open-mindedness, tolerance, as well as curiosity and willingness to learn. After all, it can hardly be denied that in our encounters with (culturally or temporally) remote art, we are often fascinated by the very fact that we are in the presence of objects that manifest purpose yet originate from contexts of which we have very little to no knowledge. This sort of vertigo (perhaps a variant of the sublime) may play an as yet under-researched role in our appreciation of remote art (although, see Korsmeyer 2019; Windsor 2023b). For how much can we be sure that our efforts at glimpsing the aesthetic value of these distant, yet present, artefacts are not coloured by the excitement generated by what Theodor Adorno (2009: 45), in a riff on Walter Benjamin's description of art's aura, called '*die Ferne selbst des Nächsten*'—that is, the very remoteness of the proximate?

II. This Issue

The first step towards addressing the challenges of remote art is to better understand the condition of remoteness itself. Most of the contributors in this special issue, either implicitly or explicitly, share an understanding of remoteness as naming an epistemic condition. Of those who address the question head-on, Michel-Antoine Xhignesse develops an account of remoteness as a 'descriptive term' that refers to the '*epistemic gulf that separates ... audiences from certain kinds of art*' (Xhignesse 2024: 362). Bence Nanay (2024b) shares this understanding of remoteness as pertaining to an audience's lack of information regarding art's social context or authorial intention. The challenge that Nanay aims to address in his paper is the '*epistemic asymmetry*' that pertains in this respect between Western and non-Western centres of art production: historical circumstances are such that we tend to have much less access to information about the social context of art produced in non-Western cultures than of Western cultures. Xhignesse's aim, on the other hand, is to show that remoteness can be as much an *intra*-cultural phenomenon as an *inter*-cultural one. Focusing on works of paleoart, Xhignesse argues that present-day art forms can wear a guise of familiarity, blinding us both to their status as remote and to their status as art.

In contrast to these approaches, Ted Nannicelli and Andrea Bubenik, in their contribution (2024), and Elisabeth Schellekens, in hers (2024), each present a distinctively normative understanding of remoteness. Nannicelli and Bubenik identify a sense in which art can be ethically remote from us, drawing on Williams's notion of the '*relativism of distance*' (Williams 2006: 160–62). Williams's idea is that moral norms across different social contexts can diverge to such an extent that precludes the possibility of any '*real confrontation*' between them. For Schellekens, on the other hand, the remoteness of artworks or artefacts is a matter of the extent to which one identifies as a member of the aesthetic community to which they belong. Such identification is '*normative*' insofar as it entails one's commitment to a community's norms of aesthetic appreciation. Remote art,

then, is art belonging to communities to which one's aesthetic commitments are minimal (or, perhaps, non-existent).

Interestingly, an artwork may be remote in either of these normative senses, even if it is not remote in the epistemic sense described by Nanay and Xhignesse. For example, the primary case that Nannicelli and Bubenik focus on is that of Titian's *poesie*: a cycle of six paintings depicting scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Titian's works are not epistemically remote in the sense that we lack contextual information about them. Yet, arguably, the ethical attitude of sixteenth-century Venice is, in some respects, too far removed from ours for us to be able to entertain it as a 'real possibility'.

In some cases, remoteness is a condition that can be overcome. This is the case whenever one has the option to participate in the aesthetic practice to which a work belongs, as in the cases that Xhignesse and Schellekens examine. But in many cases, the aesthetic practices to which works belong are so far removed from us that their remoteness is intractable. This happens either when information about a work's context of production is irretrievable, as in the cases Nanay describes, or when one is not able to adopt the evaluative attitudes required for a work's appreciation, as in the cases Nannicelli and Bubenik consider.

Despite such differences, all the contributors share an understanding of remoteness as something that pertains between two different contexts: typically, between a work's 'generative context' and its 'reception context' (to borrow the terms used by Nannicelli and Bubenik), or, exceptionally, in Schellekens's case, between one reception context and another. Thus, remoteness is essentially relational, and it is something that admits of degrees. Artworks that are remote for audiences now—say, Palaeolithic cave paintings—were not always so; and artworks that are remote for some audiences now—say, works of paleoart—are not remote for others. At the same time, however, there must presumably be some threshold beyond which any artwork warrants the appellation 'remote'. Williams's relativism of distance suggests a way of characterizing this threshold as the point at which serious doubts enter as to whether one is equipped to engage with a work on its own terms, to enter into a meaningful 'conversation' with it.

As much as art can be remote from us in different ways, so too does remoteness present us with different kinds of challenges that call for different strategies to address them. Both Xhignesse's and Nannicelli and Bubenik's contributions propose what may be called epistemic solutions to the respective challenges of remoteness that they address. For Xhignesse, the first challenge that needs to be overcome is simply recognizing the remoteness of the artworks in question. We must, Xhignesse cautions, be alert to our tendency to aesthetically dismiss art forms that are unfamiliar. If we are to engage adequately with such works, we must seek out the 'conventions, goals, history, and stylistic choices' that inform the aesthetic practices to which they belong (Xhignesse 2024: 377). In a similar vein, Nannicelli and Bubenik urge for 'a degree of quietude ... about artworks that seem morally troubling in our present reception context'—until, that is, it has been established if there is any possibility of a 'real confrontation' between our ethical outlook and that belonging to the work (Nannicelli and Bubenik 2024: 298). The strategy that Nannicelli and Bubenik propose for settling this question is historical: we need to better understand

the ‘socio-historical specificities’ of the work’s generative context to assess the extent to which we are equipped to engage in a meaningful ethical dialogue with it.

Both Xhignesse's and Nannicelli and Bubenik's strategies depend on the availability of sources of information about the generative context of the artworks in question. But this raises the question of how these challenges can be approached in cases where such information is lacking. Such cases call for innovative methodological approaches to piece together a theoretical picture of distant cultures from whatever scant sources of information are available. Anton Killin's article (2024) exemplifies an endeavour to illuminate the very furthest reaches of human art practice: the capabilities underlying the development of musicality in Plio-Pleistocene Hominins. His contribution is less about the understanding or appreciation of remote art since, in this case, the artworks in question are not even available to us. Rather, it is about understanding the conditions that make the emergence of such practices possible. Killin draws on evolutionary models—in particular, the social brain framework developed by Robin Dunbar and colleagues, and Kim Sterenly's evolutionary framework of human culture and cooperation—to develop an account of the ‘mosaic’ of ‘anatomical, cognitive, social, and technological features that comprise and/or support human musicality’ (Killin 2024: 336). As Killin acknowledges, piecing together a picture of such vertiginously remote artistic (or ‘proto-artistic’) practices inevitably involves a degree of speculation. Nevertheless, Killin's account of the ‘musicality mosaic’ is meticulously grounded in a wide range of empirical data—spanning archaeology, anthropology, and primatology—from which inferences are drawn about the lives of our early ancestors.

Nanay (2024b) and Fiona Hughes (2024), in their contributions, both propose what may be called aesthetic solutions to the epistemic problem of remoteness, in the sense that these involve attending to artworks' perceptible features. Nanay argues that if we are to overcome the ‘epistemic asymmetry’ between Western and non-Western centres of art production that otherwise, he claims, systematically biases art-historical scholarship, we need to begin our analyses of art using formal (or rather, more precisely, ‘semi-formal’) categories that are universally applicable. Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Franz Boas, Nanay proposes one such pair of universal, aesthetically relevant semi-formal features of pictorial art: those of ‘surface-first pictorial organization’ and ‘scene-first pictorial organization’ (Nanay 2024b: 386). Any picture-maker, Nanay suggests, is faced with the same choice about how to organize a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface. One can either prioritize the organization of the objects comprising the three-dimensional scene, or one can prioritize the organization of the two-dimensional rendering of those objects. By approaching an understanding of art using such categories, we may, Nanay argues, at least partially overcome the problem of epistemic asymmetry.

In contrast to Nanay, Hughes aims to solve a much more specific problem, namely, that of explaining different kinds of realism exhibited in late Palaeolithic cave art, and using a very different set of theoretical resources. It is widely documented in archaeology that late Palaeolithic representations of non-human animals tend towards a high degree of realism, whereas representations of humans tend to be more abstracted or stylized. Drawing on the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hughes proposes that these representations of humans evince an aesthetic strategy of what she calls ‘making-remote’.

This involves representing objects at the ‘threshold of appearance’ in a way that draws attention to a dynamic that is constitutive of perception itself: a perpetual surging forth and withdrawing of appearances that takes place at the edges of one’s awareness. Hughes’s innovative strategy is to use philosophy and archaeology as ‘interlocutors’: phenomenology opens up a new understanding of representations of humans in cave art, while cave art ‘offers examples that deepen understanding of the experience—not just the theory—of perception’ (Hughes 2024: 279).

Among the contributions, Schellekens’s approach is unusual insofar as it does not aim to overcome a problem of remoteness *per se*, but rather uses remote art to bring to light an answer to a more general problem in aesthetics concerning the nature of aesthetic obligations. Schellekens focuses on culturally significant artworks and artefacts that are threatened with destruction, for, she writes, when ‘the possibility of losing these artefacts forever becomes concrete ... our normative relations to them take on a sharper profile’ (Schellekens 2024: 319). By focusing on these objects, Schellekens argues that aesthetic obligations are neither purely object-oriented (as some authors have recently defended), nor purely subject-oriented (as others have recently defended), but rather they are both. Our aesthetic obligations are to appreciate and preserve aesthetic values belonging to objects, but part of what grounds these obligations is one’s identification with the aesthetic communities to which the objects belong. It remains an open question how such obligations may be affected by the relativism of distance discussed by Nannicelli and Bubenik.

The above summaries make it clear that remote art objects frequently possess different, but overlapping, dimensions of value. The question of how these different dimensions of value interrelate as part of our commitment to preserve remote art is the question taken up by Steven Hales in his contribution (2024). Hales identifies three kinds of value that art objects *qua* restoration objects can possess: ‘relic’, ‘aesthetic’, and ‘practical’. Relic value is the value that an object possesses as an authentic historical artefact; aesthetic value concerns an object’s appearance; and practical value concerns its functionality. An ideal restoration would maximize all three kinds of value. The problem, however, is that this is often not possible since maximizing one kind of value frequently entails reducing another. For example, maximizing practical value could require replacing parts, which would compromise relic value. Given such a trade-off, the question arises as to which values should be prioritized. And the answer to this, Hales argues, can never be settled by a one-size-fits-all formula. Instead, when it comes to balancing values, we must be particularists. In this way, Hales highlights a major theme that recurs in discussions of remote art: namely, the context-specificity of art’s meanings and values, as well as the challenges that stem from the context’s absence and the strategies that can be deployed either for retrieving it or getting along without it.

III. The Future of Remoteness

If one of the main effects of globalization is increasing interconnectivity and thus erasure of distances, it might seem that cultural remoteness, and not least the remoteness of art, is destined to become a thing of the past. Yet as much as global interconnectivity has helped to generate an aesthetic monoculture, it has also provided the conditions for a dizzying

proliferation of aesthetic microcultures. Practically, there is a limit as to how many aesthetic communities one can participate in. At the same time, global interconnectivity enables us to effortlessly look in on remote aesthetic practices, thereby facilitating increasingly rapid circulations, migrations, and hybridizations of artistic genres and styles. If aesthetic diversity, understood at the level of artistic (sub)cultures, is to become an increasingly prominent feature of global aesthetic life, then so too is the condition of remoteness (accompanied by the challenges and opportunities it presents) going to become of increasingly pressing concern for philosophical aesthetics.

Notwithstanding the variety of approaches on display, all the contributions to this special issue share the conviction that, despite inter-cultural diversity and, at times, radical remoteness separating artistic and aesthetic traditions, it is a meaningful endeavour, and sometimes perhaps even an obligation, to work on bridging the gap between them. Let us close with a couple of remarks on this shared feature with a view on possible avenues for future scholarship.

First, perhaps more so than with more traditional topics of Western philosophical aesthetics, and as several contributions in this issue successfully demonstrate, tackling art's remoteness calls for an interdisciplinary approach. This is hardly surprising. Reflecting on the various ways of reaching out across temporal and cultural divides has been one of the central concerns of the modern disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, and art history. It would be irresponsible if philosophers of art interested in the diversity of artistic forms were to ignore what these disciplines have to say not just on the remote cultures themselves, but also on the very problem of remoteness. One would hope that the aesthetics of remote art could open a two-way street. That is, that it would not be just aestheticians drawing on relevant social sciences and historical humanities, but also archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians taking interest in the philosophers' contributions, leading to fruitful exchanges and collaborative projects.

Second, treating art's remoteness as an obstacle or barrier to understanding may not necessarily exhaust the nature of all relevant encounters with remote art. A promising avenue of enquiry—for instance, in cognitive psychology—would be to examine the nature of the experiential effects or patterns of appreciation that obtain when engaging with remote art. While generating high levels of uncertainty that may cause dismissal or refusal of sustained attention, experiencing remoteness may just as well stimulate or enhance curiosity about, or tolerance towards, aesthetic diversity or even prompt a sense of epistemic humility. Further studies need to address the cognitive factors that motivate one's openness to experience remote art and the role that this experiencing may play in a dynamic of learning.¹

1 We thank the featured authors for their essays and for their patience throughout the editorial process. We are also grateful to this journal's editors, Paloma Atencia-Linares and Derek Matravers, for their help and encouragement as well as this issue's referees for their valuable work. Ancuta Mortu extends her thanks to the audience at the 2024 American Society for Aesthetics Pacific Division meeting. As this special issue marks the end of a three-year project on remote art, we also want to express our gratitude to those who at various moments engaged with us in thinking about art's remoteness. These include Whitney Davis, Jason Gaiger, Dom Lopes, Bence Nanay, Matthew Rampley, and Sam Rose. This work was supported by the Grant Agency of Masaryk University, MASH JUNIOR—MUNI Award in Science and Humanities, MUNI/J/0006/2021.

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