

# EXPRESSION

QUATERLY E-JOURNAL OF ATELIER IN COOPERATION WITH UISPP-CISNEP. INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMISSION ON  
THE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL EXPRESSIONS OF NON-LITERATE PEOPLES

N°12

June 2016



## WHY ART?

Rock engraving of Har Karkom, Negev Desert, named "The Thinker"  
(from Anati 2015, *The Rock Art of the Negev and Sinai*, figure 150)

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ART AND ROCK ART

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Professor Anati has posed a series of useful questions, some of which can be answered satisfactorily in a scientific sense, and some of which cannot be clarified with any credibility. Before attending to them, let me first consider the use of the little word 'art'. We can probably agree that art comprises arrangements of shapes, colours, sounds or performances by people who create art for reasons ranging from self-fulfilment to religious fervour to gaining a profit. The concept of 'art' as it is perceived today is relatively recent, emanated from Europe and has been applied to various art-like phenomena such as 'ethnographic art', children's art, graffiti, tattoos and so forth, often without clarifying whether these 'traditions' constitute art in the same sense. I understand, from art critics and commentators, that for instance thirty ordinary bricks laid out in a row in an exhibition by an artist constitute art; so does the act by an artist of slaughtering a cow at the entrance of an art gallery, and even the cow's carcass is a 'work of art' and meaning. In other words, the term 'art' encompasses such a great diversity that it seems to mean no specific class of entities, but refers to the meanings these were given. Most importantly, "the status of an artifact as a work of art results from the ideas a culture applies to it, rather than its inherent physical or perceptible qualities. Cultural interpretation (an art theory of some kind) is therefore constitutive of an object's arthood" (Danto 1988). It would be preposterous to contend that modern (Westernised) humans could fathom the ideas ancient cultures applied to paleoart tens or hundreds of millennia ago. They cannot even establish the status of recent ethnographic works with any objective understanding (Dutton 1993): interpretation is inseparable from

the art work (Danto 1986). To regard paleoart as art is therefore an application of an etic and ethnocentric idea to products of societies about whose emic parameters nothing is known in most cases. That is why we should refer to the ancient evidence as 'palaeoart': it is no more art than a peanut is either a pea or a nut. 'Palaeoart' or 'rock art' are just names; they don't imply that either is art. With this in mind I will try to respond usefully to the questions Anati posed, within a framework of science rather than any of the usual clichés of the humanities.

### **Why was a certain place selected and then used for generations to produce art?**

There are many possible reasons: why were more films made in one town than in another? Why are there enclaves of artists in certain places? However, Anati may not be referring to art per se, but specifically to rock art. Here we know some of the reasons from ethnography, e.g. in Australia, but it may not be justified to extrapolate from these to other circumstances. It may be best not to generalise, but to refer to specific cases, specific sites. It also needs to be remembered that without understanding the taphonomy applying to a given corpus of rock art, this question cannot be answered satisfactorily: surviving rock art sites were not only selected by their 'artists', but also by processes of deterioration (Bednarik 1994).

### **What is or was the function of art?**

If the question refers to rock art, the answer is simple: unless sound ethnographic information (including written statements by the 'rock artists', as in the Middle East) is available, the function of rock art can only be inferred indirectly. If the proposition cannot be tested (falsified or refuted) it has no scientific standing. But if Anati's question refers to art in the generic sense, art has numerous functions.

### **Who were the producers of this art?**

In the case of rock art, if credible information of its age is available (which is only rarely the case; most claims of this nature in the literatu

re are probably false; Bednarik 2016), we may be able to link it to specific technological traditions or ethnic groups. Without credible dating or ethnography we cannot say who produced it.

### **What pushes humans to produce art?**

Humans are not being “pushed” to produce art; many of us never produce any and we seem to be content with that. For instance my own attempt to compose an opera at age 10 had to be abandoned because of a lack of talent. It seems more a case of aptitude, talent and artistic drive, which certainly differ between individual humans.

### **What place does art take in human culture?**

It has numerous roles, among them being those in advertising, design, nationalism, religion, ethnic identity, education, the ‘art industry’, the events industry, investment, the music industry, photography, the theatre, the film industry and countless others. Even in ancient cultures art-like production, like music or palaeoart, probably had many roles, if ethnography is any guide.

### **How did the need to produce art start in early humans?**

Very little can be said about this with any credibility, and the question would profit from a reformulation expressing scientific language. It is the most consequential question Anati raises here, but a fitting response cannot be accommodated in 3000 words. Instead, let it simply be said that the issue has been investigated in great depth, and the best theory at present seems to be that palaeoart played a significant role in hominin history, in that the proliferation of exograms (Bednarik 2014) during the Early and Middle Pleistocene led to human cognitive modernity (metarepresentation, recursion etc.). This question needs to be attended to by the cognitive and neurosciences; the humanities are in no shape to answer it credibly (see Bednarik 2011).

### **When did it start?**

The advent of palaeoart seems to coincide almost with the appearance of the genus *Homo*, i.e. in the order of 2 to 3 million years ago. However, apparent traditions of palaeoart production can only be traced back to perhaps the late Early Pleistocene, and they become distinctive and well identifiable during the Middle Pleistocene, in the forms of petroglyphs, portable engravings, beads and pendants, proto-figurines, pigment use and manuports. In this context it is useful to recall that there is more Middle Palaeolithic rock art surviving in the world than Upper Palaeolithic; and that Upper Palaeolithic rock art stands not at the beginning, but closer to the end of palaeoart development.

### **Are there populations in the world without art?**

There are populations that normally produce only aniconic ‘art’ (such as the Jarawas; Bednarik and Sreenathan 2012), but there does not seem to be a major cultural tradition that lacks any form of art, be it in the form of graphic work, sculpture, ceramics, music or drama.

### **Are there people wishing to destroy art? Why?**

Excellent question! Yes, there are such people, including iconoclasts of various types (religious, political, due to mental illness etc.). Of particular interest here are those who endeavour to destroy rock art deliberately. There are several types of these: 1. *Iconoclasts*: individuals who because of ideological, religious or other reasons dislike rock art. Examples are provided by the destruction of Buddhist rock art in central Asia by Moslems; the Idol Eradication Policy declared in Lima soon after Spanish conquest; the practices of Bedouins in Arabia or White supremacists in the USA of using petroglyphs for target practice; or the practices of dynamiting rock art sites, e.g. in the Middle East or in Rio Tinto Gorge in Western Australia. 2. *Land rights issues*: some non-indigenous

land owners on whose land rock art occurs will blow up rock art (or threaten to do so) if they fear the land may be claimed by indigenous people because of the presence of the rock art.

3. *Archaeologists*: many professional archaeologists, as consultants or as administrators, have been involved in the destruction of rock art, clandestinely or openly. There are numerous cases around the world of complicity of archaeologists in rock art destruction, for instance in South America (Chile, Brazil), Europe and Australia. The best-known examples are provided by the wholesale destruction of hundreds of rock art sites in the Guadiana valley, concealed by the archaeologists responsible (Bednarik 2004), and preceded by similar destruction of the rock art in several other Portuguese valleys; and the destruction of 95,000 petroglyphs on Murujuga, the main island of the Dampier Archipelago in Australia (Bednarik 2013), believed to be the largest rock art assemblage in the world. In the latter case, the consulting archaeologists managing the destruction of numerous rock art sites have been paid many millions of dollars for their work in clearing the land for development until, after a bitterly fought 12-year campaign against two governments and numerous large resource companies, I managed in 2014 to secure protection of the remaining Murujuga rock art.

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