

'The artwork made me do it': Alfred Gell and Jeff Alexander on aesthetic agency'

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The sociology of art has entered an interesting new phase where social scientists studying the arts are less content to focus on contextual factors. A characteristic of what might be called 'the new sociology of art' is a return to the artwork and its aesthetic properties, including the affective, cognitive and material dimensions of art objects. But how are we to theorize the artwork without resorting to the assumption that art simply consists of a special category of objects? This paper considers two recent theoretical responses to this challenge: the late British anthropologist Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*; and the unfolding interest in 'iconic consciousness' in the work of American sociological theorist Jeffrey Alexander, especially his essay, 'Iconic Experience in Art and Life: Beginning with Giacometti's *Standing Woman*'. The paper uses certain empirical situations, involving a heightened sense of the agency of artworks, to compare and contrast their respective positions.

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