

# Ethnographic Art Worlds: The Creative Figuration of Art and Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, cultural anthropology in the United States—and Boasian anthropology in particular—appeared as a collaborative field connected to a social milieu of writers, musicians, filmmakers, dancers, and scholars from a variety of disciplines. My article focuses on this broad network of people who worked on projects, discussed broader social questions, and developed methodological concepts. This collaborative field stemmed from a cultural milieu of intellectuals and artists who used the interdisciplinary space to reflect upon their own work and the society they lived in. I employ and widen Norbert Elias's concept of figuration to focus on reciprocal relationships and exchange in order to understand the dynamic networks of art and anthropology between the 1920s and 1940s. By analyzing the entanglements between art and design, anthropology, sociology, literary culture, and pragmatist philosophy, we can gain an understanding of the protagonists' notions of aesthetics as a sensory, practical, and educative way of knowledge production. My figurational examination of the motif of anthropological gesture in the filmic work of Maya Deren, in Mead and Bateson's picture-ethnography *Balinese Character* (1942), and in Bateson's and Xanti Schawinsky's MOMA exhibition *Bali, Background for War* (1943), illuminates how art and anthropology become inextricable.

## 1 Thinking in Figuration

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, cultural anthropology—and Boasian anthropology in particular—appeared as a collaborative field connected to a social milieu of writers, musicians, filmmakers, dancers, and scholars from a variety of disciplines. The first generation of Franz Boas's students—researchers such as Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict—maintained a broad network of people with whom they worked on projects, discussed broader social questions, and developed methodological concepts. This collaborative field created an analytical ground for wide-ranging theoretical and methodical questions concerning the concepts of culture and art (see Chakkalakal, "Sensible Ethnographien"; Hegeman). The connections between the artistic and anthropological fields is characterized by a constant crossing and renegotiation of boundaries (see Schneider; cf. Clifford, *Predicament* 228). My article employs a method that seeks to capture this collaborative nexus as a figuration of art and cultural anthropology in its historical moment. Norbert Elias's concept of figuration lends itself to this endeavor. By figuration, Elias means a reciprocal relationship that is characterized by processes instead of static functions; a relationship of interconnection, exchange, and interaction that are all defined by relations of

power.<sup>1</sup> As a figuration, the artistic field and the cultural relativists' theoretical thinking and anthropological practice can be understood as a dynamic network. In the following analysis, I will adapt Elias's notion of figuration to develop the concept of "creative figuration," which allows me to analyze this specific historical constellation—a constellation in which anthropological practice, theorems, motifs, and works are entangled with artistic ones.

As an analytical concept, creative figuration sheds light on concrete practices of collaborating within art/anthropology. It thereby simultaneously illuminates overlapping topics and addresses why they overlap, focusing on the following analytical dimensions:

- artistic and scholarly partnerships and projects;
- co-construction of knowledge, (research) tools, and practices;
- use and creation of materials, data, and works;
- production and employment of shared aesthetic concepts and motifs;
- and figurational entanglements with other social fields such as politics and popular culture (for example, the public political sphere, or the arts and crafts movement as a socio-political movement).

When we look at the first Boasian students' anthropological works and practices from the perspective of creative figuration, we can see the stylistic, disciplinary, and conceptual specificities which drive cooperation between actors from a variety of social realms who work and think collaboratively. I understand these protagonists' various projects and works—which include constant exchange and sometimes heated debates on experience, expression, and art—as transdisciplinary and intermedial processes that produce anthropological methodologies and aesthetics. Moreover, I regard these disciplinary exchanges and media experiments as integral parts of the disciplinarization of cultural anthropology. Interestingly, the making of the discipline was very much informed and shaped by collaboration and movements situated outside the academy.

In the pages that follow, I first lay out my figurational method and then convey what constitutes and drives the art/anthropology figuration (section 2). Next, I analyze the figurational elements in cultural relativism such as the concepts of "ethos," "genuine culture," "expression," "the primitive/noble savage," and "experience." Only by analyzing the overlapping contexts of anthropology, sociology, literary culture, and pragmatist philosophy between the 1920s and the 1940s do we get an understanding of the protagonists' notions of aesthetics as a sensory, practical, and educative way of knowledge production (section 3). By means of a thick figurational description of the motif of anthropological gesture in Maya Deren's filmic work, Mead and Bateson's picture-ethnography *Balinese Character* (1942), and Bateson's and Xanti Schawinsky's MOMA exhibition *Bali, Background for War* (1943), I show how art and anthropology become inseparable (section 4). Gesture is thereby conceptualized as a sensible articulation and anthropological

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<sup>1</sup> Elias describes figuration as a "web of dependencies between people [Geflecht der Angewiesenheiten von Menschen untereinander]" (*Über den Prozeß* 70; my translation). Cf. also Elias, *Was ist Soziologie* (143).

expression whose interventionist and countercultural character illustrates the social and political effects of the art/anthropology figuration (section 5).

## 2 Enmeshed in Time and the Quarrel with Reality

Especially Benedict's, Mead's, and Sapir's use of poetry, imagery, and music sheds light on an ongoing negotiation about the creation and aesthetization of anthropological knowledge. While all of them published poems in magazines such as *The Dial* (1840-1929) and *Poetry* (1912-),<sup>2</sup> Sapir also composed music and Mead developed a strong interest in photography and film. In their Balinese field research from 1936 to 1938, Gregory Bateson and Mead extensively experimented with photographs and film. In 1947 the avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren (1917-1961), who worked closely with Mead and Bateson, reflected upon her own fascination with anthropological questions:

And on the way back that whole discussion with S[asha (Alexander Hammid)], who said maybe I would eventually abandon film and become an anthropologist. And my insistence that I would never be satisfied analyzing the nature of a given reality but would want to make my own. And his answer that that attitude brought to anthropology might make a new branch of it. And my answer that perhaps in introducing the anthropological attitude into film I was making a new branch of film. Well—maybe. (24-25)

Deren took a close look at Mead's and Bateson's Bali film material (see Holl; Neiman). In preparation for her own journey to Haiti to make films about trance rituals, Deren watched the whole twelve hours of film. Here, three points emerge that relate to anthropology and artistic filmmaking. First, defining the practice of "analyzing the nature of a given reality" as anthropological; second, identifying the practice of "making my own reality" as artistic; and third, the motivation of "making something new," producing "a new branch of anthropology" and "a new branch of film." Clearly, Deren's notion of reality sheds light on the different modernist disputes around art and its representational, symbolic, and political relationships with its socio-cultural environment, as well as on its position within history itself (cf. Eysteinnsson 22-24). The crisis of modernity becomes a crisis of reality. Nevertheless, we deal with heterogeneous artistic approaches and very different political positionalities. Thus, the quarrel with "reality" itself is a "continuous category" (Lepenies 142), to use a term by Wolf Lepenies that also crisscrosses the field of anthropology.

On the epistemological level, following Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), anthropological theory itself becomes visible as a construction of reality. As such, it is embedded in the current intellectual climate and debates as well as in a constant negotiation with other theoretical frameworks. Thus, it is important to note that Boasian cultural relativism is in dispute with "reality"; it proposes an alternative one, developing specific aesthetic modes and methodologies of producing "reality." In analyzing such processes, it becomes apparent that even though theories might be proposed and articulated in strong

<sup>2</sup> See Philipp Schweighauser's contribution to this special issue.

contrast or even opposition—for example cultural relativism in opposition to evolutionism— theoretical implementation and application might work in more diffusionist ways so that cultural relativist positions and analyses may at times turn evolutionist or functionalist. Constant negotiations within anthropological theory and cross-referencing between theories and concepts produce mutual entanglements.

The same applies to acts of cross-referencing between art and anthropology, which may appear antagonistic at times but actually reveal their connectedness. The following exchange between Mead and Bateson has been quoted by many scholars to emphasize Mead's positivistscientific position in contrast to artistic approaches, which she assumes would add additional meaning to the material:

- B: Yes. By the way, I don't like cameras on tripods, just grinding. In the latter part of the schizophrenic project, we had cameras on tripods just grinding.  
 M: And you don't like that?  
 B: Disastrous.  
 M: Why?  
 B: Because I think the photographic record should be an art form.  
 M: Oh why? Why shouldn't you have some records that aren't art forms? Because if it's an art form, it has been altered.  
 B: It's undoubtedly been altered. I don't think it exists unaltered.  
 M: I think it's very important, if you're going to be scientific about behavior, to give other people access to the material, as comparable as possible to the access you had. You don't, then, alter the material. There's a bunch of film makers now that are saying, "It should be art," and wrecking everything that we're trying to do. Why the hell should it be art? (Brand 39-40)

Here, one could turn the focus on the different notions of "material" and "data" that Bateson and Mead adduce (see Jacknis). I prefer turning the attention to "art," though, whose intrusion into anthropology sparks Mead's deft response. The interview was conducted in the 1970s, highlighting how important art was to anthropology in that decade.<sup>3</sup> When we understand these quarrels and the general connectedness between both fields as a figuration, they can be analyzed as "a particular moment in time," to borrow a phrase from conjunctural analysis within cultural studies (see Grossberg; Hall). Turning to the collaborative practices of early cultural relativists, I would like to term these practices experimental ethnographic art worlds.

"Experience" and "expression" seem to function as the motors of the art/anthropology figuration. In the following, I shed some light on the relational character of experience and expression. With this perspective, central concepts and motifs that traditionally appear as being opposed to one another can be illuminated as inseparable: reason—imagination; art—anthropology; poem—ethnographic prose; art—facts and ideas; the other—the self; and the individual—culture. Within these experimental ethnographic art worlds, we can observe an urgent search for aesthetic and cultural wholes, and this search has to be read against the political background of the time when Boas developed his concept of culture and the

<sup>3</sup> Other retrospective examples can be found in Margaret Mead's "Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words" (5-6) and her introduction to *An Anthropologist at Work* (xviii).

notion of cultural relativism (see Chakkalal, "Migration"). This is especially true for the second generation of Boas's students, who employed culture and relativism in countercultural fashion (see Matthews; Coben). It is no coincidence that there is a similarity between the holistic Boasian concept of culture and some modernist approaches to art.<sup>4</sup> Political hopes for egalitarianism and democratization were connected to emancipatory, countercultural concepts of art and culture. While, in its desire for aesthetic wholeness, the art/anthropology figuration was certainly not free from conservative, primitivist, evolutionist, and appropriative elements (see Torgovnick), Boasian holism and modernism were developed with the aim of creating a better, more just society.

A figurational analysis does not seek to disentangle antagonistic aspects, assigning them to different fields. Neither does it aim at engaging in a linear writing of intellectual history or history of ideas. Rather, in undertaking a figurational analysis, I want to understand those antagonistic aspects as core principles of the figuration. The figuration has to be understood as being constituted by reciprocal relationships and a certain enmeshment in time. Thus, a figuration is characterized by interaction, exchange, mutual dependencies and is traversed by complex power relations. As I will illustrate in more detail in the following section, my figurational approach follows both Elias and Raymond Williams's concept of the "structures of feeling" that constitute a particular moment in time (Williams 57-88).

### 3 Expression and Experience: The Aesthetic Surplus of Culture

Art is a quality that permeates an experience; it is not, save by a figure of speech, the experience itself. Esthetic experience is always more than esthetic. In it a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves esthetic, *become* esthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement toward consummation. (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 330; emphasis in orig.)

Mead and Bateson's sensual and visual methods are closely linked to theoretical concepts of theirs such as "culture" and "ethos," which invite a focus on form and expression. In their Bali research, Mead and Bateson not only extensively employed photographs and 16mm film, but they also collected stories and fables, drawings and art objects, did interviews, wrote field notes, drew maps, and conducted psychological tests. Already the amount of material, which came out of their Bali research (stored at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC), is enormous. Mead and Bateson brought back more than 25,000 photographs, about twelve hours of film, and more than 1,000 pieces of audio recordings. In this striking accumulation, we can see an attempt to collect sensations in the form of societal articulations of "emotion," "instinct," and "spirit." They traced these sensations in stories, myths, ritual and ceremonial actions, songs, plays, sculptures, and paintings as much as in everyday activities and simple gestures.

<sup>4</sup> Consider Susan Hegeman on the relation between the concept of culture and the modernist understanding of art: "[I]t is not a surprise that this new 'anthropological' definition of culture is often periodized as arising around the turn of the twentieth century, the moment historically coincident with the beginning of the great modernist experiments of art and literature" (16).

Form mattered, and “ethos” was the concept through which Mead and Bateson tried to grasp form as sensible articulation and expression:

The form of presentation used in this monograph is an experimental innovation. During the period from 1928 to 1936 we were separately engaged in efforts to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist, into some form of communication sufficiently clear and sufficiently unequivocal to satisfy the requirements of scientific enquiry. “Coming of Age in Samoa,” “Growing up in New Guinea,” and “Sex and Temperament” all attempted to communicate those intangible aspects of culture which *had been vaguely referred to as its ethos*. (Bateson and Mead xi)

Initially, the concept of “the ethos of a culture” was Mead and Bateson’s key to answering questions of representation. In his book *Naven* (1936), Bateson describes ethos as “the culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of individuals” (220). Elsewhere, he defines it according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “The characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment of a people or community; the ‘genius’ of an institution or system” (qtd. in Bateson 2).

Interestingly, these two definitions of ethos seem to contradict one another: While the first emphasizes the individual, the second highlights forms of collectivity such as community, institution, and social system. This contradiction is no coincidence; instead, it shows the relational element in cultural relativism. Cultural relativists were very much interested in the individual, but their interest lay in its constitution by, and in relation to, the society they live in. Ethos, then, reveals itself as an interpersonal concept of collectivity and relationality: it is both utterly personal and at the same time absolutely social/communal.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a whole culture can be approached as a personality and in this way be grasped in its holistic character. We get a better impression of this interpersonal collectivity when looking at Sapir’s ideas about language:

Language is itself the collective art of expression, a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions. The individual goes lost in the collective creation, but his personal expression has left some trace in a certain give and flexibility that are inherent in all collective works of the human spirit. (*Language* 246)

Analogous to his understanding of language as a “collective art of expression,” Sapir develops his concept of “genuine culture,” which, unsurprisingly, focuses on individual expression—a phenomenon that can only be thought within the enabling structure of culture and is at the same time one of the relational elements of culture:

The genuine culture is not of necessity either high or low; it is merely inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory. It is the expression of a richly varied and yet somehow

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<sup>5</sup> This is also an aspect of the notion of “character” which has to be linked to the German notion of *Volksgeist*. Character is key to the visual method of early ethnography in the eighteenth century, which becomes apparent in the German notion of *Völkerbeschreibung* (see Stocking). On the one hand, we find elaborate descriptions of bodily and biological features such as skin color, height, stature, and hair, which are simultaneously linked to personal character traits that are projected onto a whole society, such as laziness, nobleness, or fearfulness (see Chakkalakal, “Deutsch-indische Figuretionen”).

unified and consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relation to all others. It is, ideally speaking, a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless, in which no important part of the general functioning brings with it a sense of frustration, of misdirected or unsympathetic effort. (Sapir, "Culture" 410)

Sapir's imagination of an individual who is able to relate meaningfully to its surrounding world reminds us of the figure of the "noble savage" (see Fairchild; cf. Clifford, *Returns* 91-191): "The major activities of the individual must directly satisfy his own creative and emotional impulses, must always be something more than means to an end" (Sapir, "Culture" 411). Situating Sapir (along with Boas) within the European Romantic tradition of reading and employing the figure of the "noble savage" as part of the German concept of *Kultur*, "genuine" means—next to "authentic" and "unspoilt"—also "creative" and "artistic" (see Stocking; Chakkalal, "Deutsch-indische Figurationen"). Within a "genuine culture," even random actions and practices have a deeper cultural meaning. In this notion of "more than means to an end," culture is thought to produce a cultural surplus that articulates itself in different cultural forms and specific expressions. Even though not explicitly mentioned here, the "noble savage" implicitly appears throughout Sapir's works alongside other primitivist figures that are prominently around in the political context of cultural relativism, such as the figure of the Jew, the immigrant, the peasant, the *Volk* (in the German Romantic context; see Stocking), the deviant (a category used by Maya Deren when she writes about anthropology), and the child (heavily employed by Mead in her works). These figures have a transitional quality and as such open up the relational spectrum between individual and society. In a second step, they mark the conflictual relationship between center and margin, mainstream and outsider:

So I was right in presuming, on their second visit, that M[argaret] and G[regory] were, like myself, deviants, for anthropology is the study of deviancy from one's social norm and is, theoretically, best advanced by deviants who, being deviant, have a respect for the existence of deviant orders [...]. But it must be undertaken with the intent to respect deviancy, and that respect must be maintained. It must not be undertaken with the intent to resolve deviancy into "normalcy." There is not such thing as a "normal deviant." "Deviancy" is not a state, it is a statement of relationship to a given norm. (Deren 35)

Mostly, these figures are employed in such highly ambivalent manner to critique one's own norms, values, and common sense and sketch out difference and cultural contrast, which, understood as relation, is essential to the epistemological concept of cultural relativism.

This conceptualization of culture as interpersonal puts the individual at the center of anthropological attention: understood as articulations of culture, gestures, postures, and voice become important. At the same time, this culture concept of interpersonal collectivity is very much part of the contemporary fiction of American individualism as it articulates itself in several social fields (see Handler; Dewey, *Individualism*; Rorty; Albrecht). Pragmatism and its focus on "experience"—a keyword of modernity (cf. Lindner, "Experience" 20-22)—is one important figurative relation that needs to be taken into consideration. Rolf Lind-



ner has pointed out the importance of “making experience” in the entangled contexts of pragmatist thought, urban sociology, journalism, and liberal social movements in the Chicago School of Sociology:

The central role played by the category of experience in the thinking of a whole generation of intellectuals can only be understood against the background of what they are trying to get away from, namely the moral and cultural strait-jacket of a puritanical milieu which denies authentic experience. The generation we are dealing with here is a generation in the course of transition from the “genteel tradition” to the culture of modernity; it is a generation which is no longer characterized by unity, but by variety. (*Reportage* 153)

We can observe this variety of different positionalities very well in the field of literature, to draw on Bourdieu’s notion of the social field. We see literary forms of “highly subjective premises” that direct their “attention [...] predominantly toward individual and subjective experience” while simultaneously adopting “highly antisubjective or impersonal perspective[s]” (Eysteinnsson 27), like that so famously articulated by T. S. Eliot: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (43). As Astradur Eysteinnsson points out, “what the modernist poetics of impersonality and that of extreme subjectivity have in common (and this outweighs whatever may separate them) is a revolt against the traditional relation of the subject to the outside world” (28). In the overlapping contexts of literary culture, anthropology, sociology, and pragmatist philosophy, the call for “getting out there” and “making experience” is striking and gave rise to a new empiricism that was based on the notion of participatory observation, sensual perception, and lived experience (see Dewey, *Art as Experience*). In contrast to non-empirical and so-called armchair scholars, experience was propagated as a method best exemplified by George Herbert Mead, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, but it was also highlighted by the professionalization of fieldwork and ethnographic methods in anthropology.

For Dewey, experience has a “double-barrelled” quality; it is both a material collection of sensations *and* the act of cognition:

Like its congeners, life and history, it includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of experiencing. [...] It is “double-barrelled” in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. (“Experience” 8; emphasis in orig.)

Understood in its active materiality, experience stands for a collection of bodily-cognitive sensations. Simultaneously, Dewey conceptualizes experience as an act that produces knowledge and a process of sensual perception. Experience is therefore understood as a concept of relation by combining act *and* material, as well as the what *and* the how. Experience appears as a concept that enables us to think different structural spheres—individual practice and social sphere; psychogenetic and sociogenetic development; bodily sensation and sensual cognition—in close relationship to one another rather than as separate entities.



“Experience” and “culture” thus become aesthetic categories;<sup>6</sup> in its “double-barrelled” quality, experience combines material forms (such as environment, art objects, bodies, etc.) with situations of meaning production. Through art, Dewey conceptualizes aesthetic experience as a *pars pro toto* for the general sphere of influence of experience. Unsurprisingly, anthropological empirical knowledge production and the primitive as a modernist category serve as an example here:

Today the anthropologist relies upon the pattern carved on a club, or painted on a bowl to determine its origin. Rite and ceremony as well as legend bound the living and the dead in a common partnership. They were esthetic but they were more than esthetic. The rites of mourning expressed more than grief; the war and harvest dance were more than a gathering of energy for tasks to be performed; magic was more than a way of commanding forces of nature to do the bidding of man; feasts were more than a satisfaction of hunger. Each of these communal modes of activity united the practical, the social, and the educative in an integrated whole having esthetic form. They introduced social values into experience in the way that was most impressive. They connected things that were overtly important and overtly done with the substantial life of the community. Art was in them, for these activities conformed to the needs and conditions of the most intense, most readily grasped and longest remembered experience. But they were more than just art, although the esthetic strand was ubiquitous. (Dewey, *Art as Experience* 330)

The Deweyan understanding of aesthetics resonates with that described in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750/1758) but emphasizes aesthetics as a sensory, practical, and interventionist form of knowledge production that strongly anticipates social change. More forcefully than anyone else, Dewey developed new concepts of education, exploratory studying, and learning from experience (see Chakkalakal, “The World”).

In the 1920s and 1930s, experience was thought to appear in the various manifestations of culture, which meant that everything could be perceived as cultural expression. Here, it is important to note that Dewey was familiar with the cultural relativists’ research. He not only quoted Boas’s *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) in his own book *Experience and Nature* (1925) but also collaborated with him at Columbia University on various occasions (see Colon and Hobbs). He also conducted an ethnographic study with students of his about a Polish community in Philadelphia (see Dewey, *Conditions*). The numerous cross-references between Boasian anthropology and Dewey’s pragmatist ideas all make clear that both scholars developed a strong anticipatory argument for emerging social changes. The cultural Other’s expressions and experiences were thought to enrich U.S. culture and simultaneously function as an educational disruption into familiar and static life-worlds. The following section analyzes how gesture was conceptualized as a particular anthropological expression and how it became a crucial part in the aesthetization of anthropological knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Dewey explains that, in a revised version of *Experience and Nature*, he would have used the term “culture” instead of “experience” (qtd. in Hahn xv).

## 4 Gesture as a Sensible Pattern

### 4.1 Personality and Gesture

That is (leaving aside the actual intention or the degree of its realization in the Museum exhibit), you say that it is possible to create a transcendent horizontal pattern of development by cutting through a series of, as it were, vertical integrities without violating these latter, or falsifying them, or even distorting them. As a matter of fact, you praise the exhibit precisely for the fact that each grouping of materials was true to the individual culture which it represented, at the same time that these groupings were so arranged in reference to each other as to create a “sensible” pattern which transcended them all and even strengthened them, each in their individual terms as well.

Maya Deren, Letter to Gregory Bateson, December 9, 1946  
(Deren and Bateson 16)

Taking a closer look at gesture, I would like to probe the nexus of individual (experience) and collective (pattern) as it has been articulated in Bateson and Mead’s visual ethnography *Balinese Character* (1942). Bateson and Mead composed picture tableaux out of the photographs they had taken in the field. We find a strong pictorial positivism in the idea that images are better tools than text to document Balinese reality: in their introduction to *Balinese Character*, they write about the hermeneutic cage of their own language as “the weight of culturally limited connotations” (xi).

The sensible pattern is created by introducing the same motif—such as the hands I discuss below—taken from different situations into a relational arrangement. Deren, who in the introductory quote interprets Bateson’s photographic method and his way of arranging material, calls it the creation of “a transcendent horizontal pattern of development by cutting through a series of, as it were, vertical integrities” (Deren and Bateson 16). In the eye of the artist and anthropologist, the creative play with the material is required to make Balinese reality visible for Western readers/viewers. One might say that the expressive and artistic qualities of experience and culture need to be made visible through sensory and artistic methods. The fieldwork sites become social laboratories in which anthropologists experiment with various forms of expression:

Balinese hands at rest rarely lie with the fingers in seriated regular flexion as our hands do, but one finger stays at one angle and another at another in a way which would prove infinitely tiring to us. As a Balinese sits watching two children play, or two cocks fighting, it is sometimes possible to see how the two hands become separate symbols of the two who are being watched, the hands twitching slightly as the scene shifts. [...] So when a painter was working with one hand, and the other lay on the table unused, it was sometimes found that that second hand provided the more interesting series of postures, as if the neglected hand were playing out a little counterpoint of its own. (Bateson and Mead, *Balinese Character* 18)

Arbitrary hand posture becomes expressive hand gesture in the anthropologist’s play of visual arrangement. Hand postures signify a larger cultural order and are heavily referenced throughout the whole book. Thus, the simple gesture is always both random and mundane and simultaneously stands for a codified system of a



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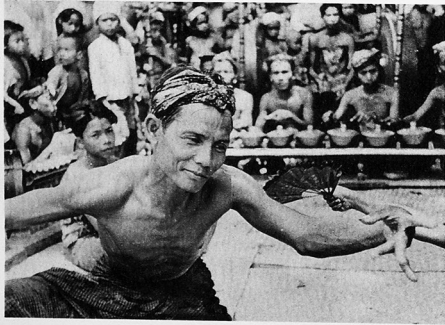
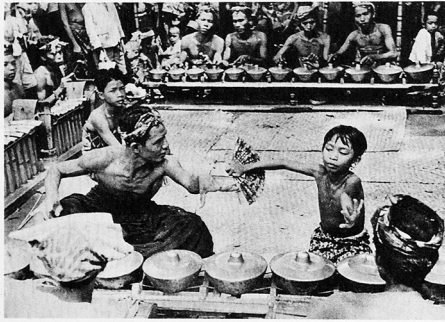
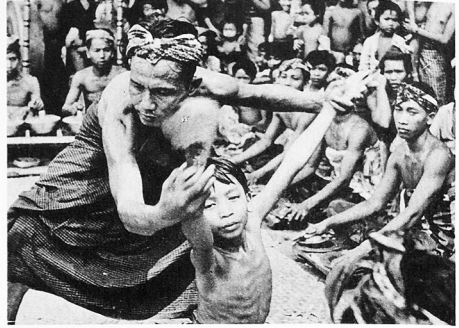


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Figs. 1-2: Plates 21 (“Hand Postures in Daily Life”) and 16 (“Visual and Kinaesthetic Learning II”) in Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character*. New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1942.





cultural language of gestures: “The Balinese learn virtually nothing from verbal instruction and most Balinese adults are incapable of following out three consecutive orders which we regard as the sign of a normal three-year-old intelligence. [...] Only by such laborious assimilation of words into word gestures made by oneself, do words come to have any meaning for action” (Bateson and Mead, *Balinese Character* 15). We see here how, in its highly problematic and allochronistic way (see Fabian), the cultural Other is made more sensitive by being infantilized. But we can also observe more: According to Richard Sennett’s study of personal and public expression in *Fall of Public Man* (1974), the end of the nineteenth century saw a crisis of expressiveness. This helps us contextualize Bateson and Mead’s interpretation of random posture as expressive gesture within the larger modern theme of personality:

It was the intrusion of questions of personality into social relations which set in motion a force making it more and more difficult for people to utilize the strength of play. This intrusion in the last century burdened an expressive gesture to others with a self-conscious doubt; is what I’m showing really me? The self seemed present in impersonal situations, beyond the power of the self to control. Self-distance was on the way to being lost. (Sennett 266-67)

Sennett goes on to describe the effects of gesture as problematic:

A person cannot imagine playing with his environment, playing with the facts of his position in society, playing with his appearances to others, because these conditions are now part and parcel of himself. The problems of middle-class ideologues in working-class movements at the end of the 19th Century [sic] derived from one difficulty with having no self-distance; such middle-class radicals were prone to be rigid in their positions lest, through changes in their ideas, they might change or delegitimize themselves. They could not play. (267)

The discovery and revaluation of gesture—and the expressive body of the cultural Other in general—within cultural relativism and especially in Bateson and Mead’s work has an ambivalent valence. While the word seems to signify the West and its “complex” societies,<sup>7</sup> the gesture becomes the sign of the “simpler,” “less complex” Balinese. Even though cultural relativists contested the evolutionary paradigm in anthropology, their revalidation of the cultural Other pays the price for what Johannes Fabian calls “allochronism” in *Time and the Other* (1983). Here, Bateson and Mead fix the cultural Other in a timeless sphere of expressive gestures and project their own crisis of expressiveness onto that Other’s domain. Through their own modes and methods of anthropological-artistic sensibility and their search for self-expression, the cultural Other becomes sensible, kinesthetic, and self-expressive. The ethnographic image and the method of sensitive patterning co-produce the primitive society as a more sensual one. At the same time, it is aesthetically captured, fixed in space and time.

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Mead’s sensory critique of words and text and her promotion of the visual and the sensual: “[E]thnographic enquiries came to depend upon words, and words and words, during the period that anthropology was maturing as a science” (“Visual Anthropology” 5). Consider also her poem “Warning” of July 10, 1924, and her and Rhoda Métraux’s book *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (16).

#### 4.2 Trans-Forming *Reality with Your Hands*

What we see in these ethnographic plates is an anthropological fascination with the play of the hands as well as with the symbolic-creative power these hands assume in making wooden sculpture, painting, shadow play, dance, and drama. Benedict writes in her unpublished essay “The Sense of Symbolism” (c. 1909) about her longing for “the old sense of unity” and promotes the creative capability of symbolism to grasp “the broad unity of things”:

The Modern Age, however, has turned from symbolism to extreme realism. In its nature there must be in symbolism revelation and yet concealment. Our modern civilizations have lost, however, the charm of concealment—the aim of all effort, in science, in literature, in life is complete revelation. All the tendencies of the modern world have been in keeping with this development—the growing emphasis on the active life, the spread of education, and especially the development of modern science. It is inevitable also in this restless inquiry into all things for the sake of complete understanding that the sense of reverence and awe should also be lost. So in our modern reaction from the symbolic we have lost somewhat of the old sense of unity, the old reverence. For symbolism is, in its highest aspect, a reverential search after the highest truth, an acknowledgement of the broad unity of things. (116)

In the framework of Benedict’s contentions with her own society, reality, and personality, the cultural Other is a signifier for older, better times. Simultaneously, such statements have a strongly anticipatory dimension, gesturing toward a future that needs to be built right now. “Simpler” cultures, symbolic capabilities, and expressiveness become major reference points for cultural critique.

Mead and Bateson’s focus on hands is also aligned with the U.S. reception of the British Arts and Crafts movement. Especially in Chicago in the 1890s, artists, educators, and scholars who were involved in progressive social reforms promoted the idea of hand workmanship as a socially regenerative force (see Denker). Hull House—a social settlement founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr—became a center of Arts and Crafts in the United States that hosted a variety of handicrafts activities, shops, and social programs as well as the headquarters of the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society. The call for social change through education for immigrants and the poor as well as a spiritual and moral uplift through art corresponded strongly with the agendas of scholars such as Dewey and Robert E. Park. As Lindner observes about the connections between sociological work and Hull House: “a number of students of sociology were among the residents; as far as they were concerned, the settlement was not only a place of social activity but also something resembling a sociological laboratory” (*Reportage* 53). Dewey’s ideas of exploratory education and his concept of “experience” need to be understood in the context of an intellectual milieu in which scholars and social reformers tried to deal with the problems of the modern city. The Chicago sociologists and anthropologists worked together closely: Sapir taught anthropology at the Department of Sociology next to Park; Park had studied under Dewey; and Boas enthusiastically reviewed Park and Herbert A. Miller’s book *Old World Traits Transplanted* (1921) in the *New York Times* (see Boas, “Great Melting Pot”). Taking these collaborations into account, one is not surprised that there are strong





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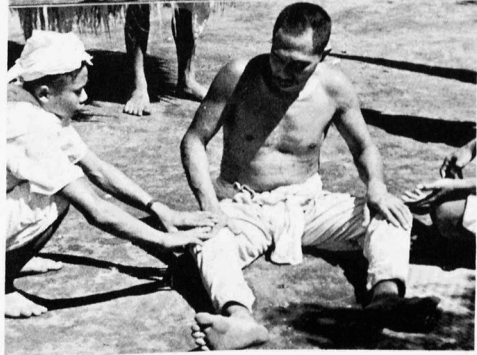
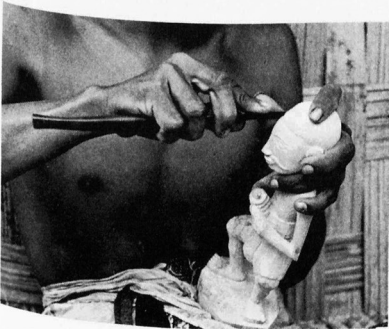
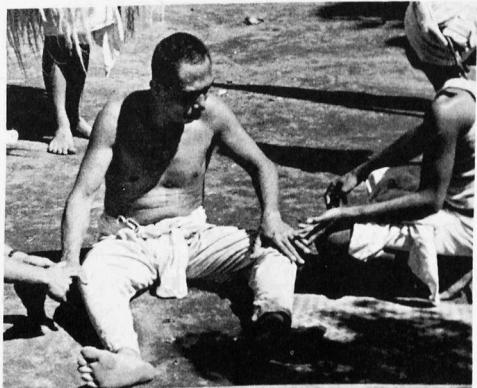
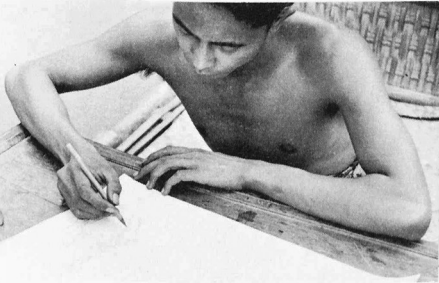
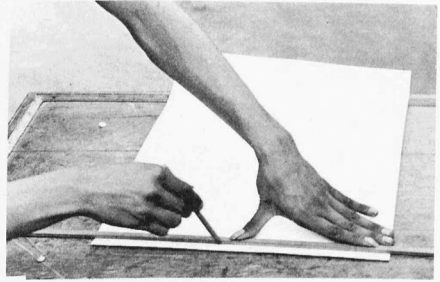
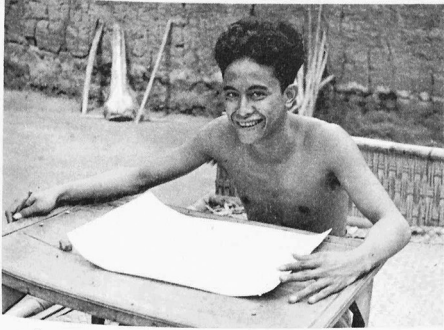
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Figs. 3-4: Plates 22 (“Hand Posture in Dance”) and 23 (“Visual Hand Posture in Arts and Trance”) in Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character*. New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1942.





parallels between perceiving the urban field and the anthropological field as laboratories for the analysis of social forms and behavior.

Thus, Bateson and Mead's focus on hands in relation to the Boasian emphasis on gesture is part of a larger figuration of the modern reconnection between the individual's handicraft as labor *and* art as critique of the industrialized West. From the 1850s to the 1920s, Arts and Crafts proposed a new aesthetic which reevaluates everyday craftsmanship as art and effaces the differentiation between art and handicraft. Andreas Reckwitz notes that handcrafters were remodeled as artists who express themselves using the object they produce with their hands (cf. 146-54). The parallels of the cultural Other as artist and the craftsman as artist become ever more apparent when we take another look at Sapir's outline of the anthropologist as a sensitive artist who needs to grasp the artistic qualities of the "genuine culture":

To what extent can we penetrate into the vitals of primitive life and fashion for ourselves satisfying pictures on its own level of reality? Can the conscious knowledge of the ethnologist be fused with the intuitions of the artist? [...] Many literary travelers have taken their eyes with them and stitched their impressions into skillful embroideries; few have had the intensity to penetrate to those currents of life which make all backgrounds commonplace and acceptable. (Sapir, *American Indian Life* 570)

This quote resonates with the introductory words to *Balinese Character* quoted at the beginning of section 3: "we were separately engaged in efforts to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist" (xi). The so-called primitive's creative act of producing culture/art is linked to the creative-sensitive capacities of the anthropologist in the field.

The intertwining of scientific observation and artistic creativity on the methodological, theoretical, and political level gives expression to a strong urge to "trans-form" or "transpattern" one's own society. Mead, who is not only regarded as the founder of visual anthropology today but who can be regarded as a pioneer of anticipatory anthropology (see Chakkalal, "World"; Mead, *World*), employed the idea of the future society in *Balinese Character*:

Meanwhile, we are faced with the problem of building a new world; we have to reorient the old values of many contrasting and contradictory cultural systems into a new form which will transcend them all, draw on their respective strengths and allow for their respective weaknesses. We have to build a culture richer and more rewarding than any that the world has ever seen. (Bateson and Mead, *Balinese Character* xvi)

Here, the primitive is situated outside of time, enabling the anthropologist to project their own future, because the anthropological field is designed as an experimental and educative sphere both overseas and at home. The conceptualization of this sphere enabled the anthropologists to negotiate their very own issues such as the crises of expressiveness, representation, reality, and personality. Photo-ethnography and ethnographic film material work as a stage on which one is able to play again. Next to discussing their film material in evening discussions with colleagues, artists, and friends (see Deren; Deren and Bateson), Mead and Bateson replied to many a scholar's enquiries about using their material as educative material for their students:

We hope that in addition to the relatively specialized use that either your films or ours would get, that a whole block of films on Human Development (or The Growth of Personality or Human Behavior or The Proper Study of Mankind is Man—or whatever) will be available for teachers, social workers, anthropologists, sociologists, doctors, nurses, psychologists, etc. (qtd. in Stone 1)<sup>8</sup>

The image of the stage as an experimental and educative site becomes even more meaningful when we take into consideration Bateson's exhibition *Bali, Background for War: The Human Problem of Reoccupation* (1943), which he curated for the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in collaboration with Alexander (Xanti) Schawinsky.

### 5 The Other Culture as an Educative Stage

Schawinsky, famously known for his work in the German Bauhaus movement, was not only a painter, photographer, architect, graphic designer, and saxophonist, but also a well-known stage designer. He conceptualized the exhibition design for Bateson's selection of the Bali material—picture tableaux, sculptures, single photographs, and drawings—and combined it into a threedimensional stage design. This exhibition is one example of how anthropological knowledge production during war times pushed the topic of cultural contact. It reveals the entanglements between contract research, primitivism, and anthropological theory, which all form parts of the complex figuration of art and anthropology. Bateson is quoted as follows in the MOMA's press release for the exhibition:

There is one common ground between the scientific world of the anthropologist and the world of art: the idea that in some sense the artist expresses himself. The exhibition is based on that idea which, in time of war, may become as grim as a mathematical equation in ballistics. Thousands of Americans—men and women, military and civilian—will be going to other parts of the world for the serious purposes of invasion, reoccupation, reconstruction and so on. They need to know about these other peoples of the world. They must be able to deal with and get on with these other "selves" that are scattered all over the world. We cannot produce for them here in New York a living Balinese; still less a whole Balinese village; or a Balinese Rajah with his court. Yet, by means of this exhibition we can produce characteristic specimens of the native art and use them to show what sort of people these Balinese are, what sort of "selves" they express. [...] Customs, habits of thought and behavior—in a word, the culture of a people—cannot adequately be expressed in words. Actually to convey the feeling of a people it is necessary to resort to their works of art and to photographs of their daily life. This is what we have done in this exhibition. (Museum of Modern Art 1)

Schawinsky constructed a wooden lattice out of spherical bars through which he threaded a plain frame. Within this frame, he arranged the ethnographic photographs and installed boards at a 90° angle, where he displayed anthropological artifacts. The single photographs, objects, and paintings merge into this construction, forming a larger three-dimensional installation that connects every-

<sup>8</sup> This was a request by the Department of Child Study, Wimpfheimer Nursery School of Vassar College New York in 1944.



Fig. 5: Xanti Schawinsky, Exhibition Panel for Bali, Background for War: The Human Problem of Reoccupation. Museum of Modern Art (1943); © The Papers of Margaret Mead, Lib. of Congress, Manuscript Division, 04 Subject Files Gregory Bateson, Folder 5, Gregory Bateson, Exhibits, Bali.

thing through round lines, a plain rectangle, and square shelves (Fig. 5-6). One is reminded of the introductory quote by Maya Deren, in which she describes the vertical lines as the sensible pattern—a vertical alignment of the ethnographic material—and the horizontal lines as single situations, which are connected by the frame construction and creating a whole. Here, we see once again both the aspect of relationality *and* the creation of a whole in cultural relativism.

Through Schawinsky's permeable design of geometrical forms, posture is once more turned into expressive gesture. The lines form an open background and transparent frame and thus play with Bauhaus aesthetic categories such as movement, rhythm, and temperature, as is best exemplified by Wassily Kandinsky in his work *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (1926): "The geometric line is an invisible being. It is the trace of the moving dot, hence its product. It emerged out of movement—from the extinction of the ultimate, self-enclosed quiet of the dot. Here, the leap from the static to the dynamic is made" (Kandinsky 57; my translation).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In the original German: "Die geometrische Linie ist ein unsichtbares Wesen. Sie ist Spur des sich bewegenden Punktes, also sein Erzeugnis. Sie ist aus der Bewegung entstanden—und





Fig. 6: Xanti Schawinsky, Exhibition Panel for Bali, Background for War: The Human Problem of Reoccupation. Shadow Play Puppets. Museum of Modern Art (1943); © The Papers of Margaret Mead, Lib. of Congress, Manuscript Division, 04 Subject Files Gregory Bateson, Folder 5, Gregory Bateson, Exhibits, Bali.

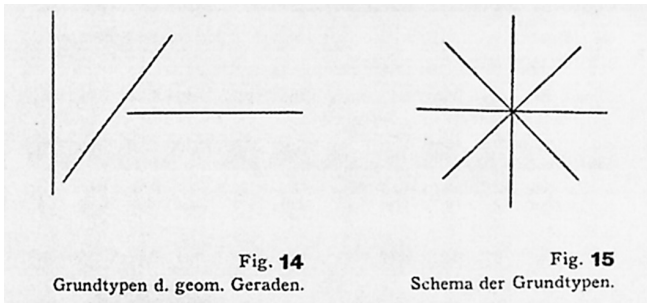


Fig. 14  
Grundtypen d. geom. Geraden.

Fig. 15  
Schema der Grundtypen.

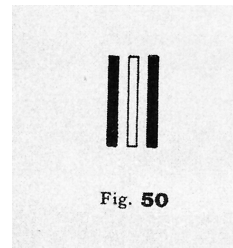


Fig. 50

Figs. 7-8: Wassily Kandinsky, illustrations from *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*. Bern: Benteli, 1926.

Interestingly, the stage theories of Bauhaus—which itself had strong connections with the Arts and Crafts movement<sup>10</sup>—were well received in the United

zwar durch die Vernichtung der höchsten in sich geschlossenen Ruhe des Punktes. Hier wird der Sprung aus dem Statischen in das Dynamische gemacht.”

<sup>10</sup> There were strong connections with the German Werkbund (founded in 1907). For instance, Walter Gropius, the founder of Bauhaus, was also a member of the Werkbund: “The

States after 1933, when Bauhaus was shut down by the Nazis. The MOMA in New York showed the *Bauhaus: 1919-1928* exhibition in 1938, which was so successful that it was subsequently also shown in Springfield, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Cincinnati (see Ohl). In Chicago, the New Bauhaus (today the Institute of Design) was founded in 1937 and entertained close relations with Dewey's experimentalist method. At Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which was founded as an experimental liberal arts college in 1933, again on the premises of Dewey's principles of progressive education, many of the Bauhaus refugees—including Josef Albers, Anni Albers, and Oskar Schlemmer—were hired as teachers (see Díaz). Performance in its experimental forms stood at the center of the school's concept: "Art is concerned with the HOW and not the WHAT; not with the literal content but with the performance of the factual content. The performance—how it is done—that is the content of art" (Albers qtd. in Pawelke 137). Schawinsky, who had also been forced to leave Germany, was invited by Josef Albers to teach at Black Mountain College in 1936:

Within months of his arrival, he organized a production of nonnarrative theater—a theater of what he called "total experience"—titled *Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion*, with music by Kurt Schwitters. [...] *Spectodrama* staged short scenes of selected elementary concepts of theater, each falling into a specific category: "optics, form and color, acoustics, sound, language, music, time, space, architecture, technology, and illusion" [Schawinsky, "*Spectodrama: Contemporary Studies*"]. (Díaz 286)

The mere gesture itself was thought to produce meaning and had a connection to the spiritual sphere of life. In a way, gesture was one of the cultural expressions that was thought to transcend culture, or, put differently, culture was thought to transcend life itself. In theater and on stage, the common cultural order could be turned upside down. It was a space of transformative imagination: "In the Balinese Theater and in the arts where phantasy can be given free play, there are many occasions when it is fun to turn the system of levels and respects and caste upside down" (Bateson, "Exhibition Manuscript").

Figurational analysis also enables us to see the relationship to New York's Museum of Natural History, where Franz Boas started his anthropological career as an assistant curator. Already in the 1910s, Boas emphasized the anthropological specimen's specific cultural uses, functions, and histories, criticizing the ahistorical and uncontextualized exhibition practices in ethnographic museums. His own performative way of exhibiting is best shown in the well known picture series, in which he experiments with the museum object as object of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

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final goal of all artistic activity is the architectural! [...] Architects, sculptors, painters, we all must go back to craftsmanship! [...] The artist is a culmination of the hand crafter" (Gropius 97; my translation). The German original reads thus: "Das Endziel aller bildnerischen Tätigkeit ist der Bau! [...] Architekten, Bildhauer, Maler, wir alle müssen zum Handwerk zurück! [...] Der Künstler ist eine Steigerung des Handwerkers."

<sup>11</sup> On these photographs, see also Ute Holl's contribution to this special issue.



Figs. 9-10: Franz Boas posing for figure in US Natural History Museum exhibit entitled “Hamats’a coming out of secret room,” 1895 or before; © National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian.

In his article “The Principles of Ethnological Classification” (1883), Boas criticizes deductive, evolutionary, and static exhibition practices, contrasting them with his own practice of relational exhibiting: “[W]e want a collection arranged according to tribes, in order to teach the peculiar style of each group. The art and characteristic style of a people can be understood only by studying its productions as a whole” (62). Boas goes on to promote the idea of cultural relativism, which is based on his concept of culture as diffusionist, relational, and performative. I would go so far as to say that this processual concept of culture, which he also uses to criticize the static and immobilizing effect of the category of race,<sup>12</sup> very much stems from its experimental, performative, and visual representation:<sup>13</sup> “In ethnology all is individuality. [...] It is my opinion that the main object of ethno-

<sup>12</sup> In his article “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology” Boas had already criticized the majority of the anthropological scientific community for their method of comparative evolutionism. In contrast to developmental stages, which would imprison human beings within the static categories of race, time and space, he introduces the relational ideas of “diffusion of culture” and “historical connection,” “for archaeology as well as ethnography teach us that intercourse between neighboring tribes has always existed and has extended over enormous areas. [...] Intermarriages, war, slavery, trade, have been so many sources of constant introduction of foreign cultural elements, so that an assimilation of culture must have taken place over continuous areas” (901-08; 906-07). Boas also promoted his ideas in several newspaper articles: “Changes in Human Types;” “Prof. Boas Predicts Race Amalgamation;” “Favors Mixing Races, Prof Boaz [sic] Defends Intermarriage of Whites with Japanese.”

<sup>13</sup> Compare here Manganaro’s analysis of the Boasian culture concept and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, in which he juxtaposes Boas’s critique of the museum and his concept of cultural relativism to Eliot’s poem as museum and culture theory (40-46).



logical collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (66).

To sum up, gesture was an exemplary case for the surplus of the individual culture. Strongly linked to the idea of the stage, gesture typifies the different layers of experience and expression, of the richness of social behavior, and culture as a whole. With its multilayeredness it could simultaneously stand for a cultural practice, a historical configuration, and a psychosocial environment. Visualizing and displaying gesture was very much an educative experiment and showcase for Western audiences in an academic, public, pedagogic, and popular-cultural context.<sup>14</sup> All in all, it combined the individual with the social and communal; it linked culture with nature, the body with the psyche, the imaginative with the rational, the poetic with the scientific; through this, it dissolved the borders of these very dichotomies.

In the end, looking at all these examples of collaboration, the art/anthropology figuration appears to be a productive and creative way of thinking and working together creatively. We might speak of the practice of "interrupting each other's trains of thought," as Bateson expresses it in a letter to Maya Deren: "Dear Maya: Excuse the dictated form, but I want to get this written down so that we can go through the points one by one without interrupting each other's trains of thought" (Deren and Bateson 18).

The concept of figuration helps us make the social impact of various experimental forms of expression of the Boasians' time understandable, and its analysis discloses constant acts of negotiation and quarrel. Figuration allows for this because it focuses on dynamic processes of knowledge diffusion, discussion, and dispute rather than on static and separated social fields, groups, or specialized scholarly fields.

I have highlighted gesture as part of the larger figuration of art and anthropology. By means of a figurational analysis, it becomes possible to illuminate how interdependencies between individuals are the product of constant exchanges and entangled histories that themselves signify knowledge practices within the art/anthropology figuration. We have to acknowledge that they are modernist, romantic, colonial, violent, appropriative, productive, counter-cultural, regressive, and anticipatory all at the same time. The modern idea of the social laboratory and its experimental play with expression and experience crisscrosses different social fields at that time. The creative figuration enables us furthermore to grasp the relational element in cultural relativism—the epistemological necessity of difference, contrast, and otherness which Boasians created, appropriated, and cherished to change their very reality and society.

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<sup>14</sup> On the Boasians' popular culture aesthetics, see Hegeman's contribution to this special issue.

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