

Prehistoric Aesthetics



Prehistoric Aesthetics

An Ontology of Stone Age Art from the
Lower Palaeolithic until the Neolithic

Brecht Govaerts

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Cover: Antony Gormley, *Lost Horizon I*, 2008, Cast iron, 189 x 53 x 29 cm (32 elements),
Installation view, White Cube Mason's Yard, London, England, Photograph by Stephen White
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Preface

What has provided the starting point for this book is the increasing interest into contemporary art within the field of prehistoric archaeology. It is the work *Figuring it Out* (2003) by Colin Renfrew, which is mainly responsible for this archaeological interest into contemporary art. The idea that contemporary art can contribute towards the understanding of the prehistoric past and particularly the study of prehistoric art intrigues me, as it poses a theoretical problem. Why would the art of today have anything in common with the art of the distant past? If this cross-cultural comparison is of any value, it must be possible to detect a principle, which is shared by both prehistoric and contemporary art. Without such a principle, the comparison would be based on superficial similarities. The difficulty is situated within the fact that one cannot speak about contemporary art outside the autonomous condition of art and the aesthetic. Whereas it is the expansion of contemporary art towards the outside (art becoming more than an individual image or object) that has attracted the interest of prehistoric archaeologists, one cannot understand this expansion apart from the autonomous dimension of art and the aesthetic. Therefore, in order to understand theoretically the cross-cultural comparison between prehistoric and contemporary art, one needs to examine whether the autonomy of art and the aesthetic can be extended to prehistory. As a result, my initial interest in the adoption of contemporary art within prehistoric archaeology became redirected towards the question whether it would indeed be possible to extend the autonomous condition of art and the aesthetic to prehistory. This idea of autonomy is specific to the tradition of Western philosophical aesthetics and therefore cannot straightforwardly be applied outside the context of Western modernity. It is a reworking of this tradition, which will prove the theoretical relevance of the concept of art for prehistory. However, even though the book does not examine the cross-cultural comparison within archaeology between prehistoric and contemporary art, it is nevertheless necessary to understand that my research has been shaped by this initial interest. This is visible in the fact that the last chapter of the book includes an ontological comparison between prehistoric and modern/contemporary art. Also, the definition of prehistoric art that I propose takes the form of a theoretical statement on the relationship between prehistoric and contemporary art.

This book is a revised and extended version of my D.Phil. dissertation, which was approved by the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford in October 2021. I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. Chris Gosden and Prof. Lambros Malafouris for the chance to develop my research project at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford. I acknowledge that my research project is rather unusual for an archaeological

department and I am extremely grateful that they had the faith that it would make a valuable contribution to prehistoric archaeology. I also would like to thank my assessors Dr Alexander Geurds and Dr Tristan Garcia for their comments and questions during the viva examination. At St Cross College, I wish to express my thanks to the Master Mrs Carole Souter, Dr Joanna Ashbourn and my College Advisor Dr Ho-Yin Mak. For financial support I am extremely grateful to the department of Fees and Funding at the University of Oxford, which has awarded me the Scatcherd European Scholarship 2017-2018. This Scholarship enabled me to study the German tradition of philosophical aesthetics and theory on contemporary art at the University of Art and Design, Offenbach am Main, Germany. I am grateful that this scholarship application has been supported by my supervisors and by Prof. Juliane Rebenitsch, who teaches philosophy and aesthetics at the University of Art and Design at Offenbach am Main. I also would like to thank Dr Dirk Setton, whose class *Theorien der Einbildungskraft* I attended during my year in Germany, which introduced me into the philosophy and aesthetics of Immanuel Kant. I also want to thank the following people with whom I had the privilege to have a conversation: Prof. Amy Bogaard, Prof. Richard Bradley, Prof. Joao de Pina-Cabral and Prof. Marilyn Strathern. Some of the arguments of this book have been or will be published as journal articles. The article *The Animacy of Stone: a Whiteheadian Perspective* is a revised and shorter version of the second chapter of this book, which was published by the academic journal *Process Studies* in 2021 (Vol. 50, No. 1, 7-27). The article *Deleuze and the ontology of prehistoric rock art* contains an analysis of the cup-and-ring rock art of Neolithic Britain and was published by the academic journal *Archaeological Dialogues* in August 2025. A revised version of this analysis has been included in chapter seven of this book. The article *Autonomous Appearance: The Becoming Autonomous of Aesthetics from Experience in Deleuzian Aesthetics* contains an argument about the ontology and aesthetic experience of Modernist art, which I also discuss in chapter eight of this book. The article will be published in Vol. 20, no. 2 (2026) of the academic journal *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*. I would like to express my thanks to *Archaeopress*, and particularly to the editor Mr Mike Schurer, for the interest to publish my book. I would like to thank the following people and institutions for giving their permission for the inclusion of the images in this book: Sir Antony Gormley and Antony Gormley Studio, Centre National de Préhistoire (France), Dia Art Foundation, Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters Universität Tübingen and Mr Nick Card (Director of the Ness of Brodgar Trust).

Introduction

Prehistoric Art, Western Philosophical Aesthetics and Metaphysics

The concept of *prehistoric art* has been adopted widely within prehistoric archaeology, but is only very rarely theorized into a definition.¹ The problem in defining this term is situated within the fact that it requires to resolve theoretically the applicability of the concept of art to prehistory. The concept of art is a Western invention, which cannot be understood apart from the way it has been defined within Western art history and philosophical aesthetics.² One could argue that we can only speak about art from the Renaissance onwards, in which we see for the first time the differentiation between artist and craftsman, art and material culture.³ One could say that the concept of art is a result of the Western process of rationalization through which the realms of the religious, political and artistic became disentangled from one another.⁴ This disentanglement reaches its culmination in twentieth-century Modernism, in which art becomes aware of its own visual language and no longer has to serve an external purpose.⁵ The Western concept of art is therefore coupled to a process in which art strives towards its own autonomous dimension. This process is unique to Western history and for this reason one could say that the phenomenon of art is indeed a Western invention and not applicable to a non-Western or prehistoric context.⁶ Within prehistoric archaeology, the Western concept of art has therefore

¹ Bradley, *Image and Audience*, 3-4; Jones and Cochrane, *The Archaeology of Art*, 183.

² Heumakers, *De Esthetische Revolutie*, 17-21.

³ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 3-4; Paillet, *Les arts préhistoriques*, 11. However, one could also argue that art has its origin in Classical Greece rather than the Renaissance. This is because it is in Classical Greece that the equation of aesthetic appearance with the principle of form emerges. Adorno argues that it is then that the autonomy of art originated (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 220-221).

⁴ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 160-167. Adorno argues that art is a result of the withdrawal from theology, which means that art would never have existed/developed without secularization. This implies that art can only occur within a secularized society (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2, 8). However, Adorno also says that the becoming autonomous of art is coupled to a process in which art turns against itself, against its own concept and in this way becomes uncertain of itself (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2). This is why the autonomy of art in modernity is coupled to the question 'What is art?'

⁵ Danto, *After the End of Art*, 7. The becoming modern/autonomous of the arts is not equivalent to what has been called *l'art pour l'art* (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 8, 421). *L'art pour l'art* is a wrong conception of the autonomy of art because it implies that art can be produced and experienced solely in itself without any relation to something external to it. This is contradictory to what Adorno calls the autonomy of art. The autonomy of art requires its other in order to be able to exist: 'Art's double character as both autonomous and fait social is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy. (...) The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form.' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 7).

⁶ This is related to the idea that art is a product of history (art is what it has become). This is why Adorno argues that one cannot find a foundation or origin of art at the beginning of human evolution (prehistory). The first works that could potentially be called art are not the origin of art because the essence of art is situated in what it has become, in its law of movement/development. The prehistoric for Adorno is what art had to negate in order to become art (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2-4). However, Adorno also argues that works that were produced prior to the becoming autonomous of art could become art in the course of history (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 397). This indicates that, even

been opposed, as it would be coupled to assumptions about the nature of the object under examination. It would imply that the object in question was only meant for disinterested contemplation and did not have a use value.⁷ Such a perspective is contradictory to the imagery and objects that have been called prehistoric art as they must have taken up an active role within the constitution of the social and therefore have been integrated within the spheres of the religious and political.⁸ The apparent visual similarity between prehistoric art and Modernism has in this sense been fiercely critiqued as it would imply that the aesthetic experience associated with Modernist art could be extended to prehistory.⁹ If we follow the idea that the concept of art is a Western invention and therefore coupled to the strife for ‘autonomy’, it would mean that *prehistoric art* as a term is contradictory as it brings together two concepts (prehistory and art), which cannot occur together.

As an alternative to the term prehistoric art one could argue that the term *prehistoric aesthetics* is more appropriate. Because the phenomenon of the aesthetic is not limited to an art object, but also applicable to nature¹⁰, one could say that it avoids the difficulty of the concept of art, as it is not limited to a specific object category. However, also in this case one becomes confronted with the problem of how to define ‘aesthetics’ for a prehistoric context. Although the phenomenon of the aesthetic is more encompassing than the phenomenon of art, it nevertheless has a specificity, which cannot be generalized. Within the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics, an aesthetic experience is defined as a *reflective experience that operates without concepts*.¹¹ This is a contradictory condition because it means that aesthetic experience can neither be reduced to a cognitive experience based on concepts nor to a sensible experience based on immediate appearance.¹² A sensible experience is solely concerned with the experience/appearance of the sensible world whereas

though prehistoric art could not have been art (because the concept of art did not yet exist), it could become art in the process of art’s development. This does not mean that we incorporate prehistoric art within our own understanding of art, but that it is only now that the truth content of the works of prehistory can manifest itself as being equivalent to art.

⁷ Jones and Bonaventura, *Introduction. Shaping the past: sculpture and archaeology*, 8-9; Jones and Cochrane, *The Archaeology of Art*, 7-18; Robb, ‘Art’ in *Archaeology and Anthropology*; Sjöstrand, *The Concept of Art as Archaeologically Applicable*.

⁸ Garrow and Gosden, *Technologies of Enchantment?*, 311; Gell, *Art and Agency*; Mithen, *A Creative Explosion?*, 181-185; Porr, *Palaeolithic Art as Cultural Memory*; Robinson, *Transmorphic Being, Corresponding Affect*, 74-76.

⁹ Bradley, *Image and Audience*, 205, 225; Clifford, *Histories of the Tribal and the Modern*, 152-156; Danto, *After the End of Art*, 94.

¹⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 90; Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 203.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 26, 122.

¹² Alexander Baumgarten was the first who developed the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. He defines aesthetics as a lower form of cognition based on sense perception (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, viii). This constellation of cognition and sensation is distinct, however, from what Kant has called the autonomous dimension of the aesthetic. Aesthetic autonomy is not a lower form of cognition based upon sense perception, but is distinct from both cognition (because it is not based upon the attempt to know an object on the basis of a concept), and sense perception (because one does not reflect on what appears, but upon how something appears) (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 26, 29, 47). Also Adorno argues that aesthetic experience can neither be reduced to sense perception nor to conceptual knowing (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 133-134).

an aesthetic experience is concerned with a *reflection on the way the sensible world appears*.¹³ This is the distinction between appearance (sensible experience) and the *appearance of appearance* (aesthetic experience).¹⁴ A reflection on the way something appears goes beyond the sensible because it means that one judges whether there is a purposiveness behind the appearance.¹⁵ Within Western philosophical aesthetics, this is related to the idea that the appearance is the result of a purposeful design (by the artist in the case of a work of art, or by God in the case of the world).¹⁶ Within aesthetic experience, one becomes aware of something that goes beyond the sensible world without transcending the realm of the sensible.¹⁷ This is what constitutes its paradoxical character: it is limited to sensible appearance yet goes beyond the sensible. An aesthetic experience adopts in this sense a characteristic of cognitive/conceptual thinking as it is through concepts and abstraction that we normally transcend the sensible world in front of us.¹⁸ However, aesthetic experience is capable of transcending the realm of the sensible while simultaneously being limited to it. This is why an aesthetic experience can neither be called a sensible experience nor a cognitive/conceptual experience, but is somehow situated between the two. It means that an aesthetic experience is a distinctive type of experience in its own right, which has its own logic. It is this what defines an aesthetic experience as an *autonomous experience*.¹⁹ Whereas the phenomenon of the aesthetic is not limited to the autonomous realm of art, it nevertheless must also take up an autonomous character in order to be characterized as aesthetic.²⁰ It is for this reason why an aesthetic experience tends

¹³ One could reformulate the 'way the sensible world appears' into 'the form of appearance'. Kant argues that 'the form of appearance' is the transcendental condition of appearance, which makes it possible for something to appear to our human faculties (Kant, *Prolegomena*, 25-26). Because we never experience the world as it is in itself, but only the world as appearance, appearance always has a transcendental form. One could say that a reflection on the way something appears means that one reflects on the transcendental form of appearance. This, however, is not how Kant defines aesthetic experience. The transcendental for Kant is an *a priori* condition of experience, which means that it can never itself be the object of experience. On the other hand, Kant does argue that aesthetic experience makes one aware of the transcendental operation of one's faculties. Within this book I will demonstrate that it is through aesthetic experience that one can gain insight into the logic of a particular lifeworld, which means that aesthetic experience is not directed towards the sensible dimension of a world, but towards the transcendental logic of the world. Deleuze argues in favour of aesthetic experience as the making visible of the transcendental principles of world (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 184).

¹⁴ Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics*, 117. The appearance of appearance means that one is not concerned with the question whether the appearance corresponds to a real existing object or not. Kant makes the following statement: '(...) where the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know whether we are concerned with the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it on the basis of mere contemplation.' (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 36)

¹⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 349, 351. Even though an aesthetic appearance is not a sensible appearance, in both cases we are nevertheless dealing with appearance. Kant explains this through the idea that, because an aesthetic experience is not based upon concepts, it can only take the form of appearance/sensation (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 50).

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 140.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 18.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 19.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 16, 74; Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 54-55.

²⁰ Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is concerned with the question whether the experience of pleasure/displeasure is based upon a principle in its own right, which is not dependent upon the empirical/sensible world. It is only when the experience of pleasure/displeasure is based upon such a principle that it can be called an aesthetic experience

to be associated with a passive form of contemplation distinct from practical action.²¹ This is problematic for prehistory, as it would mean that the aesthetic experience of nature would have operated as a passive contemplation distinct from the way the landscape was actually used. The term prehistoric aesthetics is in this sense equally problematic as the term prehistoric art.

However, what needs to be understood is that this inapplicability of the autonomy of the aesthetic to prehistory constitutes a paradox. This is because the autonomy of aesthetic experience (as defined by Kant) is a type of experience that is based onto the human condition as such and in this sense not culturally specific.²² Although one could say that Kant's conception of aesthetic autonomy is connected to a specific condition of subjectivity (the universal transcendental subject), which is the subject of Western Enlightenment, this does not necessarily mean that only a Kantian transcendental subject can have an autonomous aesthetic experience. We speak of an autonomous aesthetic experience when the human faculties do not need to perform any function, but stand either in free relation (the beautiful) or tension with one another (the sublime), which makes the alignment between concept and appearance impossible.²³ Although the operation of the human faculties indeed takes up different forms in different cultures, one can only deny the possibility of the free/discorded relation of the faculties to other cultures when one would deny them the possession of human faculties altogether (which would be a form of dehumanization).²⁴ The limitation of aesthetic autonomy to Western Enlightenment and modernity is a violation of the universality that defines the autonomy of the aesthetic in the first place. If the autonomy of the aesthetic is indeed a universal principle, it cannot be limited to one culture without destroying its very autonomy. *The limitation of the autonomy of aesthetic experience to Western modernity is therefore contradictory to the autonomy of the aesthetic itself.* Instead of the autonomy of aesthetic experience being an invention of the modern West, I argue that it is more correct to say that the West has made this autonomous principle explicit. This means that the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics must not necessarily be rejected, as it gives insight into the nature of aesthetics itself. In order to develop a *prehistoric aesthetics* one needs to

in the autonomous sense (Deleuze, *La philosophie critique de Kant*, 9). However, the feeling of pleasure/displeasure only reaches its complete autonomous form when aesthetic experience becomes transformed into an *autonomous appearance*. Within this book I will put forward the condition of autonomous appearance as the autonomy of modern/contemporary art. It is an aesthetic appearance that has emancipated itself from both the experiencing subject and appearing object. It makes a form of pleasure/displeasure possible that is completely autonomous from appearing object and experiencing subject, which could be regarded as the most ultimate form of autonomy. It indicates that Kant's conception of aesthetic autonomy did not yet define the principle of pleasure/displeasure in its most ultimate autonomous form.

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 36-37.

²² Kant argues that the condition of the judging subject is inclusive of all who belong to the human race (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 229).

²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 48-49, 86, 88.

²⁴ Alberti *et al.*, "Worlds Otherwise", 907.

examine how the autonomy of the aesthetic provides the basis for the constitution of the social and in this sense is not opposed to the religious and political.

One could say, however, that an argument in favour of the universality of aesthetic autonomy neglects the radical otherness of prehistoric art, the fact that the prehistoric past resists a straightforward reduction to our modern Western philosophical categories.²⁵ The universality of aesthetic autonomy could be seen as part of the project of Western Enlightenment in which one tries to assimilate the 'other' into one's own categories of thinking.²⁶ The quest for universality is not itself universal, but something highly specific to Western modernity.²⁷ This is why the acknowledgement of the universality of aesthetic autonomy does not necessarily mean that it can be extended beyond Western modernity. What needs to be understood, however, is that the autonomy of the aesthetic (and art) is not simply part of the project of Western Enlightenment, but also a critique on Western Enlightenment. Aesthetic autonomy critiques Western modernity from within by being a form of reflection that resists the reduction of the world to conceptual thought and the mere sensible.²⁸ Therefore, even though aesthetic experience is not a religious experience (we do not need to believe in God in order to have an aesthetic experience) it makes a relation to the world possible that transcends the merely given.²⁹ This is why aesthetic autonomy according to the philosopher Theodor Adorno can operate as a form of critique on modernity; hold the potential for a different world without taking the form of a political project or social revolution.³⁰ The mere existence of aesthetic autonomy and art is itself a presence of *otherness* within the modern Western world, something that violates its logic simply by being present.³¹ It is because the universality of aesthetic autonomy is itself a form of otherness that it cannot be reduced to a mere version of the universality of Western Enlightenment. This is why the autonomy of the aesthetic is not by definition opposed to the 'other' of Western modernity and therefore could indeed be relevant for the study of prehistoric art.

If one acknowledges that the extension of aesthetic autonomy beyond Western modernity is not contradictory to the autonomy of the aesthetic itself (as a form of otherness), a similar argument could be made for the autonomy of art. The equation

²⁵ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 172-174.

²⁶ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, 160-167.

²⁷ One could say that it is only Western modernity that has uncoupled the universal from the subjectivity of experience. This leads to a distortion of the universal, as the universal is not opposed to, but entangled with subjectivity (e.g. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 48). I argued elsewhere that this eventually leads to the becoming schizophrenic of the universal (Govaerts, *The Becoming Schizophrenic of Aesthetic Experience*).

²⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 74, 79, 308; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 85.

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 80.

³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 79-80, 119.

³¹ Adorno makes in this regard the following statement: 'That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality, and that it employs its means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an over-administered world.' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 73).

of the autonomy of art with the idea that art does not serve any purpose apart from its own (being a work of art) misconceives the fact that art's autonomy is situated within its capacity to operate as a depiction of truth.³² An art object can neither be reduced to its material form nor to conceptual meaning and for this reason must be understood as the transformation of the autonomous principle of the aesthetic (constellation of cognition and sensation) to a materially constructed object.³³ *The autonomy of art does not stand for the detachment of art from the everyday, but for the recreation of the autonomous dimension of the aesthetic within material form.* It is this idea of recreation, which allows to conceive why art is both related to and differentiated from the aesthetic.³⁴ The opposition of the aesthetic to mere sense perception (immediate appearance) and conceptual knowing is made explicit within art, as art is a material object that cannot be reduced either to its empirical dimension or to a concept.³⁵ It is this countering of mere empiricism and conceptual knowing, which gives art the capacity for agency, as it allows art to work against the reduction of reality to immediate appearance or a concept.³⁶ In the case of Modernism, this is visible in the way art has the capacity to operate as a critique on the distortion of rationality and modern life. Whereas Modernist art is indeed detached from the everyday lifeworld, it nevertheless has an inherent tendency towards the social in the sense that it opens up the promise of a different world, a different way of existence.³⁷ The autonomy of art is therefore not

³² Badiou, *Kleines Handbuch zur In-Ästhetik*, 18-25; Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 44; Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 68.

³³ Adorno argues that artworks surpass the empirical world by their empirical dimension, by the way they have been constructed. Artworks are empirical objects that are non-empirical because they are not simply objects that appear, but objects as appearance (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 112). However, art is appearance because it works against the fact that it is mere appearance/semblance. It is because Modernist art wants to undo the semblance character of art, that it exposes that art is based upon semblance/appearance (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 113).

³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 97, 105-106. The distinction between art and aesthetics is coupled to the disintegration of the fields of semiotics and philosophical aesthetics since the end of the eighteenth century (Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, 21). The becoming autonomous of aesthetics could be interpreted as the detachment of aesthetic appearance from meaning, which means that a pure aesthetic appearance is nothing but the appearance of appearance. Art is distinct from a pure aesthetic appearance because it does have a meaning. However, the meaning of autonomous art is situated in the fact that it takes the form of the incommunicability of meaning, which means that art is a *sign that does not signify*. The meaning of autonomous art is situated in the negation of meaning (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 210). Art in the autonomous sense is therefore neither a semiotic sign, nor a pure aesthetic appearance, but something in between. Within this book I argue that modern/contemporary art is based upon the collapse of the distinction between aesthetic appearance and meaning/semiotics, which I define as the *becoming autonomous of appearance*. It is precisely when aesthetics becomes detached from semiotics that the distinction between aesthetics and semiotics also disappears. It is this that gives rise to the paradox of autonomous art as a sign that does not signify and as being an aesthetic appearance that revolts against its appearance character. Therefore, even though there is indeed a distinction between aesthetics and art, this distinction also becomes irrelevant within modern/contemporary art. I will argue that prehistoric art is based upon a type of aesthetics in which aesthetics and meaning were entangled with one another without being completely equated. This could be related to Lévi-Strauss' argument about a middle way between aesthetics and logic (Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 14). Autonomy is situated in the simultaneous relation and distinction between aesthetics and semiotics, in the way they are connected yet different. The equation of autonomy with the purification of aesthetics from semiotics leads to an incorrect conception of aesthetic autonomy, which I will define within this book as *literal*.

³⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

³⁶ Adorno makes in this regard the following statement: 'By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world – a rejection that inheres in art's concept and thus is no mere escape, but a law immanent to it – art sanctions the primacy of reality.' (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2)

³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 330; Jaffé, *Over utopie en werkelijkheid in de beeldende kunst*, 31-33.

concerned with art's detachment from the everyday, but with art's capacity for social agency.³⁸ Whereas the equation between prehistoric art and Modernism has been critiqued for being a sole formal similarity, it is more correct to say that Modernist art has made explicit how the autonomous dimension of art has an intrinsic social/political character. This acknowledgement indicates that the autonomous dimension of art could indeed give insight in the social dimension of prehistoric art as it allows understanding art's capacity for agency.

In order to come to a definition of prehistoric art, I argue that this autonomous principle of art and the aesthetic, which characterizes the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics, should not be critiqued but reworked.³⁹ This argument is not straightforward as it is opposed to the current theorization of art and aesthetics within prehistoric archaeology.⁴⁰ The work that has largely shaped the archaeological understanding of art and aesthetics is the work *Art and Agency* (1998) of the anthropologist Alfred Gell. Within this work, Gell argues for an anthropological approach to art, which is non-aesthetic. Gell considers the Western tradition of aesthetics to be inapplicable to tribal art as it does not allow understanding the active role these objects had within the mediation of social relationships.⁴¹ Instead of aesthetics, he puts all his emphasis on art as a mediator of social agency. This means that the condition of art is not intrinsic to an object itself (in terms of its formal, aesthetic dimension), but a function associated with an object's capacity for social agency.⁴² However, following my argument above, the capacity of art to operate as social agent is coupled to its autonomous dimension. Moreover, because the autonomous dimension of art is coupled to the autonomous dimension of the aesthetic, Gell's argument in favour of social agency cannot be understood apart from the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics. Because Gell fails to acknowledge this tradition, his theory has become extended to the whole realm of material culture objects.⁴³ Following the adoption of actor-network theory within archaeology, every material culture object is a potential agent within the constitution of the social.⁴⁴ This generalization of Gell's work has resulted into a reappraisal of the aesthetic within archaeology.⁴⁵ Aesthetics is approached as *everyday aesthetics*, which means the

³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 308.

³⁹ Adorno, however, argues that the magical/animistic predecessors of art were not autonomous (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 17).

⁴⁰ e.g. Bradley, *Image and Audience*; Jones, *Rock Art and Ontology*; Jones, *The Art of Assemblage*; Jones and Cochrane, *The Archaeology of Art*; Porr, *Palaeolithic Art as Cultural Memory*; Robb, 'Art' in *Archaeology and Anthropology*; Wells, *Visually Complex Objects, Ontology of Space and Political Dynamics*.

⁴¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 2-5.

⁴² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 5-7.

⁴³ Chua and Elliott, *Adventures in the Art Nexus*, 13-15.

⁴⁴ Knappett, *Thinking Through Material Culture*; Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency*; Robb, *Beyond Agency*, 504-505.

⁴⁵ e.g. Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses*; Jones, *Rock Art and Ontology*, 172-173; Gosden, *Making Sense: Archaeology and Aesthetics*; Skeates, *An Archaeology of the Senses*; Skeates and Day, *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*.

affective dimension of our encounter with objects, environment and the lifeworld at large. This reappraisal of the aesthetic is a result of a growing attention towards the material properties of archaeological artefacts.⁴⁶ Whereas Gell considered the aesthetic to be contradictory to an (art)object's capacity for agency, an everyday aesthetics integrates aesthetics within the everyday lifeworld and therefore aligns aesthetics and social agency with one another.⁴⁷ However, such a conception of the aesthetic is contradictory to aesthetic autonomy as it makes it impossible to conceive how aesthetic experience has its own autonomous logic. It is this autonomous logic, which is necessary to understand the alignment between aesthetics and social agency.⁴⁸ By reducing aesthetics to everyday aesthetics, one risks to reduce it to empirical sensation, which is contradictory to aesthetic autonomy as an experience/appearance that transcends the sensible.

The conceptualization of aesthetics as everyday aesthetics is based on the aesthetic theory of John Dewey, who critiques the opposition between everyday experience (as being non-aesthetic) and the experience of art (as the autonomous realm of the aesthetic).⁴⁹ One could read Dewey's aesthetics as being a critique on the autonomy of aesthetic experience, as defined by the Western aesthetic tradition. However, this does not mean that Dewey is unconcerned with the autonomy of the aesthetic and that he would reduce everyday aesthetics to empirical sensation. His argument in favour of continuity between art and the everyday does not mean the replacement of the autonomy of the aesthetic with everyday aesthetics, but the acknowledgement that the autonomy of the aesthetic also characterizes everyday experience. This is visible in the fact that experience for Dewey is the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements within an environment. The reason why such a type of experience is aesthetic is because it operates simultaneously as a cluster of parts (the accumulation of histories that have shaped the process of individuation) and by unity (the fact that experience is pervaded by a singular quality, which means the unity of the subject).⁵⁰ This same constellation, Dewey argues, is visible in a work of art in the sense that it consists of parts that together give rise to a singular quality.⁵¹ A work of art therefore makes visually explicit what defines people's experience on an everyday basis.⁵² This idea of a 'becoming explicit' both means that the experience of art is distinct from the everyday and that it must be structurally equivalent to everyday experience. The analogy between art and the everyday put forward by

⁴⁶ e.g. Conneller, *An Archaeology of Materials*; DeMarrais et al., *Rethinking materiality*; Jones and Cochrane, *The Archaeology of Art*; Jones and Diaz-Guardamino, *Making a Mark*; Knappett, *Thinking Through Material Culture*.

⁴⁷ Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses*; Skeates, *Towards an Archaeology of Everyday Aesthetics*.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 7-8, 327.

⁴⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 2.

⁵⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 15-16, 37, 42, 57-58.

⁵¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 177, 185-187, 211-212.

⁵² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 87, 142, 180, 293.

Dewey therefore does not mean a rejection of the autonomy of the aesthetic, but the acknowledgement that this autonomy stands for a rational principle that also characterizes people's everyday struggles for fulfilment within an environment. An everyday aesthetics should therefore not be understood in opposition to the autonomy of the aesthetic, but as being structurally similar to it.

In order to prove the relevance of the autonomy of art and the aesthetic for prehistory, one must understand how this autonomy provides the basis for the social itself and is therefore integrated within the lifeworld.⁵³ Whereas the aesthetic theory of Dewey provides a way to understand this integration, it is not sufficient because it fails to understand how the aesthetic can take up different forms in different lifeworlds. Within archaeological theory, the condition of the social or lifeworld has been coupled to metaphysics.⁵⁴ This connection to metaphysics is primarily concerned with the way prehistoric societies did not have the same conception of reality as modern Western societies, which is based on the dichotomy of subject and object. In order to explain the phenomenon of animism, a different conception of reality is required, in which such a dichotomy was non-existent.⁵⁵ However, the idea that different lifeworlds are coupled to different conceptions of metaphysics can easily be misconceived as a form of cultural relativism (different societies experience reality in different ways).⁵⁶ Instead of different metaphysical conceptions of reality, one must conceive how metaphysics itself takes up a plural character.⁵⁷ Within archaeological theory, one can distinguish between two main approaches: *relational ontology* and *critical ontology*.⁵⁸ Relational ontology is based on the ontological continuity between subject and object and puts forward a general ontological condition based on the ontological primacy of relations.⁵⁹ When relations become ontologically prior, the relation between people and matter is not external to reality, but an actual shaping of reality. This shaping should not be conceived literally (in terms of the empirical modification of the environment), but in terms of how the modification of the relation between people and matter gives ontologically rise to different worlds.⁶⁰ The reason why we are not dealing with cultural relativism is because there is no such thing

⁵³ However, the idea that art was integrated within the lifeworld in prehistory and detached from the lifeworld in modernity is too simplistic. Adorno argues that prior to modernity art was in a certain extent indeed more immediately social. However, it is with the becoming autonomous of art that the social aspect of art is made explicit. Art becomes truly social only in its opposition to society (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 307-308). It is the immanence of society in the artwork that defines the social character of art, not the immanence of art in society (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 316-317).

⁵⁴ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*; Alberti et al., "Worlds Otherwise"; Conneller, *An Archaeology of Materials*; Fowler, *The Emergent Past*; Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*; Ingold, *One world anthropology*; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Pina-Cabral, *World*.

⁵⁵ Alberti and Bray, *Animating Archaeology*, 338.

⁵⁶ Alberti et al., "Worlds Otherwise", 902-903; Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, 176.

⁵⁷ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 168; Pina-Cabral, *World*, 158-167; Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native*, 256.

⁵⁸ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 166-167, 174-175.

⁵⁹ Fowler, *The Emergent Past*, 20-67; Jones, *Rock Art and Ontology*, 177.

⁶⁰ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 169-171.

as a general reality on which one could project different cultural interpretations.⁶¹ The ontological primacy of relations means that the relation established constitutes the world in which one lives. It therefore allows conceiving how metaphysics is not external to human action, but becomes modified through it. The second approach, critical ontology, does not rely on a general ontological condition (like the ontological primacy of relations), but addresses ontology as a condition that is bound to the particularity of the archaeological/anthropological record.⁶² Critical ontology in this sense radicalizes the traditional anthropological/archaeological task of reconstructing (past) ways of life or worldviews to the reconstruction of different ‘metaphysics’ or ‘ontologies’ without relying on a general metaphysical theory.⁶³

The reason why the pluralisation of metaphysics is important for my argument is because it can, in my opinion, only be understood through the autonomous logic of the aesthetic. The pluralisation of metaphysics requires the autonomy of the aesthetic because it is the aesthetic that allows conceiving how a general principle is bound to particularization and therefore can take different forms. The process metaphysics of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead are based on the ontological primacy of aesthetic experience, which means that it is through the autonomous logic of the aesthetic that a general ontological principle becomes particularized and therefore gives rise to different worlds.⁶⁴ It allows conceiving how different lifeworlds should not be understood as different worldviews on a general metaphysical condition, but as different particularizations of this general metaphysical condition.⁶⁵ Both the idea of radically different ontologies and of a general relational ontology should be opposed because both fail to understand that ‘worlds’ must simultaneously share a general principle and be ontologically opposed

⁶¹ Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 164-165.

⁶² Alberti, *Archaeologies of Ontology*, 172-175.

⁶³ Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, 68.

⁶⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 71, 85-86; Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 108, 280; Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 101-102.

⁶⁵ A metaphysics of experience seems at first sight opposed to Kant’s critical philosophy, which has formed the basis for the idea of cultural perception. However, it is Kant who has shifted the discipline of metaphysics away from speculative knowledge about the supersensible existence of objects/entities towards *a priori* knowledge about experience (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, x). *A priori* knowledge means knowledge that is independent from the empirical world, yet is applicable to the empirical world in the sense that it is concerned with the way experience structures one’s vision of the world. The transformation of metaphysics into a metaphysics of experience means that it becomes a logic of the different ways in which experience can operate, which gives rise to different worlds. This is not necessarily equal to cultural relativism when experience itself becomes ontological primary (which is what happens in the metaphysics of Deleuze and Whitehead). A metaphysics of experience is the transformation of metaphysics into transcendental philosophy. The concept of the transcendental is the concept Kant uses to define the *a priori* condition of experience. This means that the approach of this book could be called a transcendental approach to metaphysics and experience. However, what has to be taken into account is that the transcendental as a *a priori* condition of experience is only one way in which the transcendental can operate. Within this book I argue that prehistory requires a different conception of the transcendental in which the transcendental stands in a non-hierarchical relationship with the actual world. This means that the transcendental is no longer just the *a priori* condition of experience, but also becomes the *a posteriori* object of experience. This paradoxical condition in which the transcendental is both the condition and object of experience is necessary in order to define an animistic lifeworld.

to one another. Without a common principle, it would be impossible for different worlds to relate to one another, which would make the practice of archaeology and anthropology itself (as the understanding of ‘another’ world) impossible.⁶⁶ However, without ontological difference, there would be no other worlds, and therefore archaeology and anthropology would be equally impossible. One could even say that without ontological difference the phenomenon of art and aesthetics could not occur⁶⁷, as art/aesthetic autonomy is the otherness within Western modernity. The paradox of aesthetic autonomy is that it is simultaneously based on universality and otherness, or universality as otherness (because it is not the same as the universality of the Western Enlightenment). This is why it can define how worlds are both ontologically distinct from one another and based upon a common principle. Through this alignment between the autonomy of aesthetic experience and metaphysics it becomes possible to extend Dewey’s integration of aesthetic autonomy within the everyday lifeworld to ontological difference.

However, if aesthetic experience becomes ontological primary, it ceases to be a unique capacity of a human being and becomes a capacity of every entity in the universe. This has led towards a post-human perspective on aesthetics, in which aesthetics becomes uncoupled from the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics, in which it is defined as a reflective judgement on the way appearance appears.⁶⁸ The danger with this generalization of aesthetics is that the autonomous dimension of the aesthetic becomes distorted and reduced to sensible affect.⁶⁹ By eliminating the distinction between human and non-human, aesthetic autonomy loses its reflective character and becomes reduced to the ontological continuity between people, matter and the lifeworld.⁷⁰ Such a reduction is contradictory to our human condition, as we are creatures that do not only engage with the world, but are also able to reflect upon the world.⁷¹ It is aesthetic autonomy, which explains this continuity between reflection and engagement, as it is a type of reflection that operates through feeling. It is the autonomy of the aesthetic, which allows to understand how a reflection upon the

⁶⁶ Pina-Cabral, *World*, 29.

⁶⁷ This could be related to the fact that the becoming modern of the arts is to a large extent based on the encounter with what is other to Western modernity, such as the prehistoric, the ‘primitive’, the surreal, the unconscious etc.

⁶⁸ A post-human perspective on aesthetics is proposed by the philosophical movement speculative realism (Askin *et al.*, *Introduction. Aesthetics after the Speculative Turn*, 31-33). Within archaeology, a post-human perspective to aesthetics is concerned with a decentering of human agency (Conneller, *An Archaeology of Materials*; Fowler, *The Emergent Past*; Gillings and Pollard, *Making Megaliths*; Hamilakis and Jones, *Archaeology and Assemblage*; Ingold, *Ancestry, generation, substance, memory, land*; Jones, *Prehistoric Materialities*).

⁶⁹ A post-human aesthetics violates the autonomy of aesthetic experience because it violates the principle of experience itself, meaning the encounter between an experiencing subject and appearing object. In chapter eight of this book I will argue that a post-human aesthetics is not based upon aesthetic autonomy, but on the becoming autonomous of appearance from experiencing subject and appearing object.

⁷⁰ Alberti *et al.*, *Archaeology After Interpretation*; Back Danielsson *et al.*, *Encountering Imagery*; DeMarrais, *Animacy, Abstraction, and Affect in the Andean Past*; Hamilakis and Jones, *Archaeology and Assemblage*; Wells, *Visually Complex Objects, Ontology of Space and Political Dynamics*.

⁷¹ This is visible in Whitehead’s idea that experience (as prehension) can operate as propositional judgement.

world does not necessarily presuppose a pre-given world, but is itself a form of world making.⁷² *If one acknowledges the ontological primacy of the aesthetic, an aesthetic judgement is not merely reflective in the passive sense, but gives shape to the subject of experience and the world that is experienced.* The ontological primacy of the aesthetic therefore does not necessarily mean that one should eliminate the distinction between human and non-human. Instead, it indicates that it is the reflective character of aesthetic experience, which is unique to human beings, that forms the basis of the ontological condition of ourselves as a species and the basis of human world making. The reason why this is important is because it allows conceiving why art and the aesthetic played such an important role within the constitution of the social during prehistory. Therefore, instead of a post-human perspective on aesthetics, I argue that prehistoric archaeology requires the distinctiveness of the autonomy of aesthetic judgement as defined by the Western aesthetic tradition. This means that two very different philosophical traditions (process metaphysics and Western philosophical aesthetics) must be integrated with one another. When the aesthetic is ontologically prior, the reflective character of aesthetic judgement becomes integrated with the ontological primacy of the aesthetic of process metaphysics.

However, in order to develop a definition of prehistoric art, it is not sufficient to solely rework the autonomy of art and the aesthetic for prehistory, as there is no general form of prehistoric art. A general approach would be contradictory to the nature of prehistoric art itself, as it would fail to acknowledge how different forms of prehistoric art are coupled to different forms of world making. It is for this reason that a theoretical reworking of the concept of art and aesthetic autonomy requires confrontation with the archaeological record. Whereas it is theory, which allows understanding the autonomous character of art and the aesthetic, it is the archaeological record that allows to understand how this autonomous dimension was particularized. For this reason one could say that a sole theoretical understanding of the aesthetic is contradictory to the phenomenon of the aesthetic itself, as the autonomous character of the aesthetic can never take a general form, but only a particular form. The development of a prehistoric aesthetics therefore means the constructing of different types of aesthetic experience through the prehistoric record.⁷³ Moreover, following the ontological primacy of aesthetic experience, such a constructing must simultaneously give rise to a particularization of ontology and therefore allows conceiving how the particularization of the aesthetic is coupled to a particular lifeworld. Following my earlier argument that the autonomy of art

⁷² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 71.

⁷³ The idea of developing different types of aesthetic experience is based upon Whitehead's argument that the history of human civilization can be understood as a mutation of human experience (Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, vii). The mutation of experience means the mutation of aesthetic experience, as aesthetic experience is ontologically prior in Whitehead's metaphysics.



Figure 1. Antony Gormley, *Lost Horizon I*, 2008, Cast iron, 189 x 53 x 29 cm (32 elements), Installation view, White Cube Mason's Yard, London, England, Photograph by Stephen White & Co., © the artist

must be understood as a recreation of the autonomy of the aesthetic within material form, it is on the basis of a differentiation of aesthetic experience that one gains insight into the diversity of prehistoric art. Another reason why the confrontation with the archaeological record is important is because it will provide insight into how aesthetic autonomy can be distorted. When aesthetics becomes distorted, it is no longer aligned with truth, but deception. A distortion of the aesthetic is coupled to a distortion of art, which means the transformation of art into fetishism.⁷⁴ This potential for distortion indicates that the phenomenon of prehistoric art cannot

⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 199.

simply be assumed, but must operate as a critical category to differentiate between rational and irrational forms of world making. We can only speak about art when the modification of aesthetic experience and therefore the lifeworld is characterized by truth.⁷⁵

The reason why I have given my book the title *Prehistoric Aesthetics* is because one only gains insight into the phenomenon of prehistoric art by analysing the different modifications of aesthetic experience. Even though the phenomenon of prehistoric art cannot be reduced to a prehistoric aesthetics, it is through the reconstruction of different forms of aesthetic experience that it becomes possible to understand why prehistoric art took a particular form and its role within the constitution of the social. The cover image is the work *Lost Horizon I* (2008) of the contemporary artist Antony Gormley (Figure 1), in which a cast of his own body is multiplied and positioned on different ‘planes’.⁷⁶ I find that this image captures well the idea of how a general human condition (the ontological primacy of aesthetic judgement) is coupled to different space-time constellations and therefore gives rise to different ‘planes’ or ‘worlds’. It visualizes well the challenge of this book, which is the reworking of the general principle of art and aesthetics for prehistory and the theorization of how this general principle was particularized. I have not adopted a gender perspective (no differentiation between male and female pronoun) because I theorize three different modifications of aesthetic experience for three different prehistoric lifeworlds. This implies that such a modification defines the experience of all members of the lifeworld (men, women and children). This does not mean that the difference between men and women is unimportant, but that this difference must be understood as a nuancing of a shared modification of experience. Without a shared basis in experience it would be impossible for men and women to occupy the same space-time and therefore the same lifeworld.

The book is structured into two parts: *Prehistoric Aesthetics: Rethinking Western Philosophical Aesthetics for Prehistory* (Part I) and *Towards an Ontology of Stone Age Art: From the Lower Palaeolithic until the Neolithic* (Part II). The first part is a theoretical examination into aesthetics, in which I rework the autonomy of aesthetic experience and art for prehistory. This reworking is primarily concerned with the way aesthetic autonomy can be related to an animistic context. The choice for animism has been made because it allows me to address the topic of prehistoric aesthetics in a general way, without becoming involved into the empirical variety that characterizes prehistoric art through space and time. It is within the second part that I examine how my theoretical work can be particularized for different forms of prehistoric art.

⁷⁵ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 265-267.

⁷⁶ Royal Academy of Arts, *Antony Gormley*, 184-191.

My focus is on prehistoric art during the Stone Age, from which I discuss the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic period, the Upper Palaeolithic of the Franco-Cantabrian area and the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland. This second part should not be understood as the application of the theory developed within Part I, but as a further elaboration and complication of my theoretical argument. Following the idea that aesthetic autonomy is a general principle that requires particularization, it is through the particularity of the archaeological record that different modifications of the general condition of the aesthetic can be theorized.

Part I: Prehistoric Aesthetics: Rethinking Western Philosophical Aesthetics for Prehistory

In order to rework the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics for prehistory, I have divided this part into four chapters. Within the first chapter *Deleuze, Animism and Aesthetic Autonomy* I undertake an examination into the relation between aesthetic autonomy and metaphysics. The process metaphysics of Gilles Deleuze is a type of metaphysics that is based on the ontological primacy of aesthetic experience. I examine how this situation of aesthetics on the level of ontology is not opposed to aesthetic autonomy, but is based upon it. It is the autonomy of aesthetic experience, which Deleuze uses as model for his metaphysics in order to define a form of experience, which is generative of reality rather than an experience of reality as pre-given. This realization is important because Deleuze's metaphysics has become a major influence within prehistoric archaeology. For this reason, an in depth examination of Deleuze's metaphysics will offer a first step to resolve the distinction between prehistoric aesthetics and the Western tradition of philosophical aesthetics. A second aspect of Deleuzian metaphysics that I will address is that Deleuze put forward a metaphysics that cannot be understood in a general way, but only within a particular way. This is relevant for the connection between aesthetics and animism because it means that animism is a particular form of world making, which can be related to prehistoric societies, but cannot be equated with Deleuze's metaphysics as a whole. I will therefore analyse how Deleuze's reliance on aesthetic autonomy is specifically related to an animistic context. I will provide three characteristics of aesthetics within an animistic context: (1) the condition of the nomad war-machine, (2) the distinction between animism and fetishism and (3) animism as a particular form of *Earth-Territory* constellation.

Within the second chapter *Whitehead, Aesthetic Judgement and the Animacy of Stone* I develop my examination of the connection between aesthetic autonomy and metaphysics further through the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. On a general level, the process metaphysics of Whitehead and Deleuze can be understood as equivalent, as both define a type of metaphysics that is based on

the ontological primacy of aesthetic experience. However, what Whitehead adds to Deleuze's metaphysics is that he incorporates human cognitive judgement within his metaphysical system. This realization is significant because the adoption of process metaphysics in prehistoric archaeology is mainly concerned with a countering of the ontological distinction between human and non-human, therefore acknowledging the ontological continuity between people and the lifeworld as a whole. However, by solely focusing on the ontological continuity between human and non-human one risks to eliminate the condition of humanity itself and therefore the particularity of human world making. As human beings, we do not only engage with the world, but also reflect onto the world. We therefore do not need a replacement of the human capacity of reflection with engagement, but understand how they exist in configuration. Such a configuration can be understood through the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. *The metaphysics of Whitehead therefore allows connecting Deleuze's argument on aesthetic autonomy as model for metaphysics to the unique human capacity of aesthetic judgement.* Moreover, I will use Whitehead's integration of experience as reflective judgement within his metaphysics to further define the relation between aesthetics and animism. I will argue that the condition of animism does not require the ontological continuity between human and non-human, but the human capacity of aesthetic judgement.

Within the third chapter *Rethinking Kant's Conception of Aesthetic Autonomy for Animism* I undertake an analysis of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. The choice for Kant can be understood as provocative, as Kant's theorization of the aesthetic has never been considered relevant for prehistory. Moreover, Kant's theorization of aesthetic experience is based on a conception of the human subject that relies on the Western idea of a human being as an autonomous individual, which is a condition that is specific for Western Enlightenment. It is precisely this condition of subjectivity that is currently criticized within prehistoric archaeology and replaced by a relational conception of subjectivity in which the distinction between the autonomous subject and its other (the object, non-human or world) does not exist. However, the reason why Kant's theory on aesthetic autonomy is nevertheless important is because it outlines the way an aesthetic judgement has its own rational principle. Moreover, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* outlines the full complexity of the autonomy of the aesthetic by distinguishing between the beautiful, the sublime, the aesthetic judgement of art and teleological judgement. I will mainly focus on the distinction Kant makes between an aesthetic judgement and teleological judgement. An aesthetic judgement is concerned with the appearance of form as beautiful whereas a teleological judgement with the experience of the supersensible dimension of nature. What must be taken into account in order to define aesthetic autonomy for prehistory is that a teleological judgement is not aesthetic. This is because a religious experience for Kant

requires the incorporation of a concept (e.g. the concept of God) whereas an aesthetic experience is without a concept. It is because of this distinction between aesthetic and teleological judgement that Kant's theorization of aesthetic autonomy cannot be applied to a religious context. By undertaking a rereading of Kant's aesthetics through the process metaphysics of Whitehead, I argue that this distinction can be resolved. Moreover, the transcendence of the distinction between aesthetic judgement and teleological judgement will also allow to resolve a second distinction within Kant's aesthetics and that is the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. It is such a resolvement, which will allow developing a type of aesthetic autonomy that is not limited to a passive form of contemplation, but becomes aligned with practical action.

The fourth chapter *Critical Metaphysics: Rethinking Adorno's Aesthetics for Perspectivism* is concerned with the way an autonomous aesthetic experience has the potential to operate as a form of critique onto society and human rationality. It is such a form of aesthetic autonomy, which is necessary to understand the art of Western Europe from the twentieth century onwards. When aesthetic experience becomes a critical type of experience, the relation between aesthetic autonomy and metaphysics changes. Within the first three chapters the relation between aesthetic autonomy and metaphysics is limited to the way an aesthetic experience allows the contemplation of the order of nature. However, when aesthetic experience becomes a form of critique, it does no longer function as the experience of order, but in terms of a critique on the actual condition of the world. The reason why the critical potential of aesthetic autonomy is relevant is because it is not limited to the modern West, but also a characteristic of animistic societies. Within this chapter I undertake an examination into Theodor Adorno's philosophy on metaphysics and aesthetics in order to define aesthetic experience for the animistic societies of South-America (which have been called by the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro perspectivist societies). Perspectivism is a type of animism in which one must be careful to not be deceived by appearance. This means that experience cannot simply be defined as the contemplation of the order of nature, but must take up a critical character. I argue that such an experience must be defined as an aesthetic experience that is simultaneously dialectical and non-dialectical. It is the integration of a dialectical conception of aesthetic experience with the process conception of aesthetic experience of Deleuze and Whitehead that will make it possible to define aesthetic autonomy in its full complexity and to construct a conception of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic experience for prehistory/animism. Moreover, within this final chapter I will put forward an argument how the opposition between aesthetic autonomy and animism can be resolved. I will make this argument by resolving the distinction Adorno makes between artistic spirit and animistic spirit.

Part II: Towards an Ontology of Stone Age Art: From the Lower Palaeolithic until the Neolithic

In order to specify my theoretical work of Part I, I discuss three different prehistoric periods, in which the phenomenon of the aesthetic and art took up different forms. I have divided this part into four chapters, of which the first three chapters address respectively the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic period, the Upper Palaeolithic in the Franco-Cantabrian area and the Neolithic in Britain and Ireland. Within the fourth chapter, I analyse how the discussion of these three different prehistoric periods allows the development of a general definition of *prehistoric art*. Within the first chapter *An Ontology of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Art* I examine how the autonomy of aesthetic experience can be theorized for the earliest prehistoric record. This poses a challenge, as we are dealing with early hominid species and not with the modern species *Homo sapiens*. It requires posing the question whether the capacity for aesthetic judgement and the production of art is unique to the modern mind or a capacity that is shared by different hominid species. Based on my chapter of Kant, I argue that the capacity for aesthetic judgement must have been essential throughout human evolution. An aesthetic judgement is a type of reflection that does not presuppose the human cognitive faculties, but activates the human cognitive faculties. If the capacity for aesthetic judgement would be unique to *Homo sapiens*, it would be impossible to conceive how our capacity for cognition itself could have developed. Through an analysis of the symmetrical beauty of a Lower Palaeolithic hand axe and stone bola, I examine how Kant's conception of aesthetic experience as *disinterested* can be extended to the Lower Palaeolithic record. This extension also leads to the realization that the earliest type of archaeological artefacts can be theorized as a form of art. As soon as early hominids developed the capacity to recreate the aesthetic dimension of nature into material form, the phenomenon of art emerges. This capacity of recreation can only be understood when they were capable of a type of experience that is both reflective and sensational (the autonomy of aesthetic judgement).

Within the second chapter *An Ontology of Upper Palaeolithic Cave Art in the Franco-Cantabrian Area* I examine how the emergence of cave art in the Franco-Cantabrian area is coupled to a particular modification of aesthetic experience. Whereas the development of cave art has been interpreted as marking 'the origin of art', I argue that Upper Palaeolithic cave art is actually less true to the condition of art than the early prehistoric record. This argument might seem surprising, as we are not dealing with early hominids, but with the modern species *Homo sapiens*. However, it is precisely this shift towards the modern mind that complicates the phenomenon of art and the aesthetic, as it is characterized by the incorporation of a conceptual proposition within aesthetic experience. Through the inclusion of a conceptual

proposition, it becomes possible for art and aesthetic experience to be transformed into a social system, in which the realms of the social, natural and technological were integrated. Also, it allows the phenomenon of animism to occur, as animism requires the ability to have a conception of reality as a whole. It is therefore not the condition of art that is limited to the modern mind, but the condition of *animistic art*. However, the complication of the phenomenon of art and the aesthetic also entails the potential for distortion, which means that aesthetic experience becomes transformed from a form of judgement into a form of deception. With the emergence of the modern mind, the modification of aesthetic experience could either give rise to art or to fetishism. We speak about fetishism when art loses its truth character and becomes reduced to illusionary appearance. In the case of the Upper Palaeolithic in the Franco-Cantabrian area, I argue that we are dealing with a modification of aesthetic experience in which the aesthetic took up a hybrid character. This means that aesthetic experience was both rational and irrational, both a form of truth and a form of deception. Such a modification constitutes a paradoxical situation, as it would mean that Upper Palaeolithic cave art was both a form of art and a form of fetishism. This paradoxical situation is coupled to the necessity of reconciling two opposing forms of world making with one another (hunter-gatherer type of perception with a shared conception of space and time) during the Upper Palaeolithic. The hybrid character of Upper Palaeolithic cave art is therefore a result of the contradictory character of the Upper Palaeolithic lifeworld itself.

Within the third chapter *An Ontology of Neolithic Art in Britain and Ireland* I examine how the complication of aesthetic experience through the modern mind takes up a different form during the Neolithic. Whereas Upper Palaeolithic cave art is associated with a hybrid type of aesthetic experience, I argue that the Neolithic is characterized by a *rationalization* of aesthetic experience. A rationalization of aesthetic experience means that the incoherence between appearance and reality becomes transformed into the condition of truth. It means that the Neolithic lifeworld was not based on the isomorphy of substances in which appearances could be exchanged, but on the coherence between appearance and reality. Through my reworking of Kant's theory of the aesthetic, I argue that the Neolithic lifeworld can be defined through a type of aesthetic experience, in which the distinction between the beautiful and sublime, the teleological and aesthetic falls apart. This is necessary in order for art and the aesthetic to take up a distributed character (being entangled with practical action) and operate as a social system in which the order of nature was incorporated. I focus on the way this entanglement of the beautiful and sublime, the teleological and aesthetic, gives rise to different forms of Neolithic art, consisting of both practice-based artefacts concerned with the process character of form and enduring art forms. In the first category, I discuss three different types of stone decoration: the linear engraving in

domestic houses (Orkney), the carved stone balls (eastern Scotland) and the Folkton Drums (Yorkshire). Within the second category, I discuss the cup-and-ring rock art tradition within the open landscape. Moreover, I examine how the modification of aesthetic experience during the Neolithic gives insight into a type of animism that is not based on isomorphy of substances (Upper Palaeolithic), but on the endurance character of nature.

The fourth chapter *Prehistoric Art and the Aesthetic Autonomy of Modernity* addresses the question how the phenomenon of prehistoric art can be defined. In order for the concept of prehistoric art to be meaningful, it must be possible to detect a general principle across the different types of aesthetic experience that I propose. I argue that three such principles can be detected: (1) an unconscious form of the autonomy of art, (2) art as war-machine that simultaneously promotes State-formation and works against State-formation, and (3) art as form of relations. These three general characteristics give insight into a type of social organization (and therefore world making) in which the autonomy of art and the aesthetic provided the basis of the social/world itself. The critical potential of art and the aesthetic took the form of the countering of both the centralization of power (egalitarianism, nomadism) and the reduction of reality to mere empiricism (animism). Secondly, I undertake an examination into the ontology and aesthetic experience of modern and contemporary art. This is necessary because a definition of prehistoric art must resolve theoretically how the condition of art in Western modernity is related to and different from the condition of art in prehistory. The concept of art is a Western invention, which means that any use of the concept of art beyond Western modernity requires a statement about how and why it can be extended. Based on this examination I propose a definition of prehistoric art. The definition of prehistoric art that I propose is based on a *dialectical relationship between prehistoric art and contemporary art*. This is a type of definition that does not ‘categorize’ prehistoric art, but that requires the reader to engage in a thought process on the dialectical relationship between prehistoric and contemporary art. It will provide a theoretical statement on the relationship between the Western striving towards art’s autonomy and the origin of art within prehistory.