

## Derek Allan

### The Very Idea of Art

Donald Preziosi, an influential modern voice in art history, argues that his discipline has proved 'particularly effective in naturalizing and validating the very *idea* of art as a "universal" human phenomenon'. If this claim is true, it would mean, in my view, that art history has done a serious disservice to our modern understanding of art. For as the French art theorist, André Malraux, points out, the idea of art is definitely *not* a universal human phenomenon, there being ample evidence that the vast majority of cultures throughout history, have *not* regarded their painting, sculpture, poetry, and music as 'art'.

Today, of course, we willingly regard many works from non-European and early cultures as art and welcome them into art museums, but this is a recent development, barely more than a century old. This paper examines certain major issues arising from this situation, including: when and why the idea of art arose; the radical change in the word's meaning that occurred after Manet; how this change led to the inclusion of many non-European and ancient works in our modern world of art; and the inadequate responses to these developments by modern philosophers of art and art historians.

**Dr Derek Allan** is a Visiting Fellow in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the Australian National University. His principal research interests are the theory of art and literature, European literature, and visual art. Derek's publications cover figures such as Dostoyevsky, Laclos, Goya and the twentieth-century art theorist and novelist, André Malraux. His most recent publication is a book entitled *André Malraux and Art: An Intellectual Revolution*. It is also available in French.

**ANU COVID safe event:** Social distancing / masks mandatory / COVID safety officer

**Online:** Zoom Meeting ID: 861 8419 0389 / Password: 2022



Pig mask. Chokwe people, Angola. Late 19th century (National Gallery of Australia)