

Slaves to Sculpture

A Response to Patricia Penn Hilden

Carol Thompson

What is called African art covers a wide range of objects introduced into a historicizing perspective of European values since the eighteenth century. These various "objects" which, perhaps, were not "art" at all, became art by being given, simultaneously, an aesthetic character and a potentiality for producing and possibly reproducing artistic forms. One could wonder whether, understood in their initial form and significance, they would not have created a radical "mise en perspective" of Western culture.

—V.Y. Mudimbe (1986:4)

Apart from direct, concrete, material possession of the world and of people, the oppressor consciousness could not understand itself—could not even exist. [...] The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time—everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal.

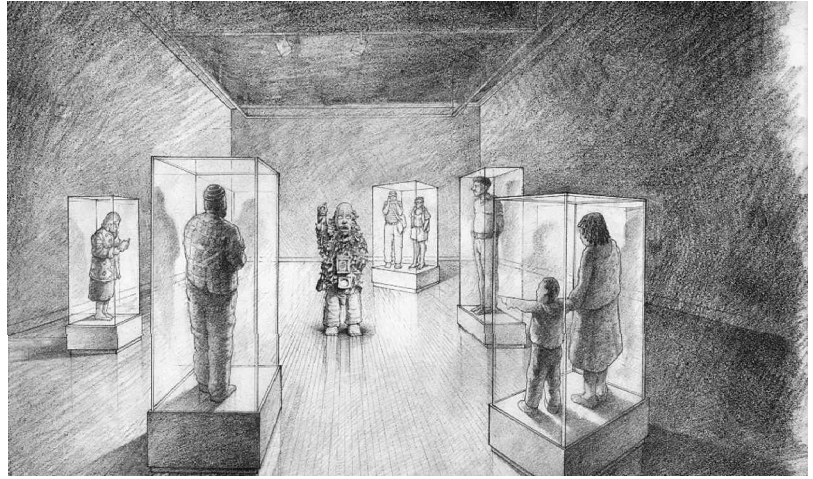
In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence. Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more—always more—even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, to be is to have and to be the class of the "haves."

—Paulo Freire ([1970] 1993:40)

Despite massive efforts to define it strictly as carved figures and masks, African art operates in excess of wood. While powerful forces might struggle to forever fix its meaning, narrowly delimiting its terms, African art, as a category, is not easily contained.¹

While the purported subject of museum exhibitions of African art is "African art"—not an innocuous category in and of itself (as many have noted)—exhibitions of African art, like all exhibits, are also "exhibits of those who make them" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:2). All exhibitions of African art are

1. Chris Müller's sketch of a Kongo nkisi nkonde standing in the middle of a gallery surrounded by cases filled with people hypothetically turns the table on standard museum practices. (Illustration by Chris Müller)



2. By playing with size and scale, including both extremely large and small works of art within the same space, the exhibition *Animals in African Art* (1995) in a small way departed from standard display techniques. (Photo courtesy of The Museum for African Art)



at once at least a twofold display. Due in part to this twofold nature, African art exhibitions are fraught spaces, riven with competing forces.

Even though paint of a so-called “neutral” reddish-brown earth tone provided the wall color most commonly used in African art exhibits—before the Center for African Art, now the Museum for African Art, began to challenge this and other paradigms—no exhibition of African art is ever neutral. All African art exhibits are ideologically charged.

For viewers who share the same assumptions and resources as the makers of an exhibit, an exhibition may seem “transparently correct—obviously right,” as Steven Lavine observes (1989:37). Alternatively, for visitors who do not share the same assumptions and resources, an exhibition may convey dramatically different meanings, entirely unintended by the exhibition’s creators and beyond their control.

Museum exhibits, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes of heritage productions, “tend to conflate their effects with the instruments for producing them” (1998:157). But, no matter how hard museum display techniques strive to make the exhibition of African art seem natural, normal, habitual, and cus-

tomary, the very foreignness of these objects to a museum context is often profoundly self-evident. Further, the overwhelming sense of the estrangement of the object from its former environment—placing sculptures on pedestals under bright spotlights—can produce an alienating effect that “makes the interface a critical site for the production of meanings” (157).

Museum exhibitions are “powerful engines of meaning” (157). Looking at how particular exhibitions of African art constitute their subject provides clues regarding the museum’s “agency of display” (128). As Stuart Hall points out, while an exhibition provides a “framework for interpretation” using “objects on display to create meanings about the subject matter of the exhibition,” which in turn also reflects its creators, every exhibition participates, knowingly or unknowingly, in larger discourses (1997:3, 5). Following Foucault (1980), Hall explains that discourses both rule in and rule out “how a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (44). Recognizing how particular discourses at once regulate “a range of texts, and [...] forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society” provides a first step towards “opening up a new discursive formation [...] with the power and authority, the ‘truth,’ to regulate social practices in new ways” (44, 47). How have the discursive formations that have constructed African art changed over time? Where have the radical breaks between discursive formations occurred?

By asking what exhibitions do and for whom, one begins to scratch the surface of what is at stake when museums exhibit African art. The Museum for African Art in SoHo has particularly diverse constituencies. How does the Museum reconcile their competing interests?

Patricia Penn Hilden’s essay “Race for Sale: Narratives of Possession in Two ‘Ethnic’ Museums,” examines the Museum for African Art and the George Gustave Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian as sites of contemporary cultural contestation. While the essay’s provocative title suggests it might provide new insights into the fraught terrain of museum displays, disappointingly, it largely does not. Though Hilden does raise several crucial issues, other authors have addressed many of the same questions both more thoroughly and more incisively. Exasperatingly, her hyperbolic critique is flawed throughout, larded with errors and unsubstantiated conclusions. While I will not attempt to correct all of her errors or challenge all of her unsubstantiated conclusions, I will engage some of the larger, and less frequently addressed issues she raises, focusing exclusively on her critique of the Museum for African Art, its exhibits, and its publications.

Inevitably, exhibitions of African art organized by the Museum for African Art activate racial politics as they are immediately consumed by capitalism’s commodifying power. Given this, what range of possibilities exists? Can such an institution ever be conceived as a “force for change” (Kaepler in Lavine 1989:38)? When a Euro-American institution exhibits African art, are “radical breaks” possible? Further, to what degree does the Museum, whatever the ethnicity of those in control, have any “agency of display”?

In the essay “Race for Sale,” Hilden states she will begin her analysis of the Museum for African Art and its exhibitions through a reading of “its texts, including catalogues produced both before and after the opening of the present Museum space.” Three of the four titles she cites were published before the Museum relocated to its current address. *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (1987), *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (1988), and *The Art of Collecting African Art* (1988) were all exhibitions organized while the museum was located on the Upper East Side, rather than in SoHo. I know since I was there. As a minion, rather than what Hilden describes as an “official” of the Museum, I helped create these exhibitions, working in various capacities from curatorial intern in 1987 to assistant curator in 1988. In subsequent years I was associate edu-

cator, registrar, curator for education, and finally associate curator. I left the Museum in 1996. Thus, I am thoroughly familiar with the Museum and its troubled history.

Although she does not credit Susan Vogel for being the driving force behind its conception, Hilden is correct when she states that “The Center for African Art was founded in the early 1980s by a group of wealthy collectors who served as its first board of directors,” led by Vogel. Nor can I argue with her description of how at its original location:

the Center readily represented those on its board of directors, collectors for whom African [...] art offered both an outlet for their commodity fetishism and a route out of modernity—personal escape from the urban, cold, competitive capitalist world which provided them with their art-buying fortunes.



Ironically, for me, reading the opening passages of Hilden’s essay with its quotes from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, published in 1993, recalls the intense debates surrounding the Museum’s move to SoHo that same year. When the Museum relocated against the wishes of many of its board members and major patrons it literally “moved the center,” just as it had previously, on an intellectual level, worked to challenge Eurocentric perspectives regarding Africa.

Sadly, the Museum’s subsequent history replicates the pattern of postcolonial politics. The struggle for control since Susan Vogel’s departure in 1994 has vacillated between autocratic mismanagement by ill-equipped officials whose paramount interest is their own aggrandizement and self-preservation, to the further consolidation of the Museum’s *raison d’être* as protector of the investment value of board members’ African art collections. Thus, just as in too many neocolonial African contexts, serving “white” interests remains the primary *modus operandi*. And, just as the overhaul of many government administrations in neocolonial Africa has not produced needed changes, as “white” faces are replaced with “black” ones, the same is true for the Museum. Within both contexts, the interests of the majority of Africans and people of African ancestry are not well served.

Most revealingly, within the Museum the one key position that has not been filled by an African or a person of African ancestry is that of Director of Exhibitions. Notably, while fewer “white” faces are present within the Museum’s administration, and in the most publicly visible positions, Frank Herreman, a Belgian, is the most notable exception. Why a Belgian as Director of Exhibitions? Obviously, the answer to this question is linked to the colonial legacy. Belgium is rich with sculptures from Central Africa, the former “Belgian Congo.” Enid Schildkraut and Curtis Keim’s *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (1998:23), estimates that between 70,000 and 100,000 objects were removed from Central Africa before WWI. Belgium has the largest holdings of art from this part of the world and these collections are among the world’s most valuable. Herreman’s expertise concerns art from this region—and his knowledge suits

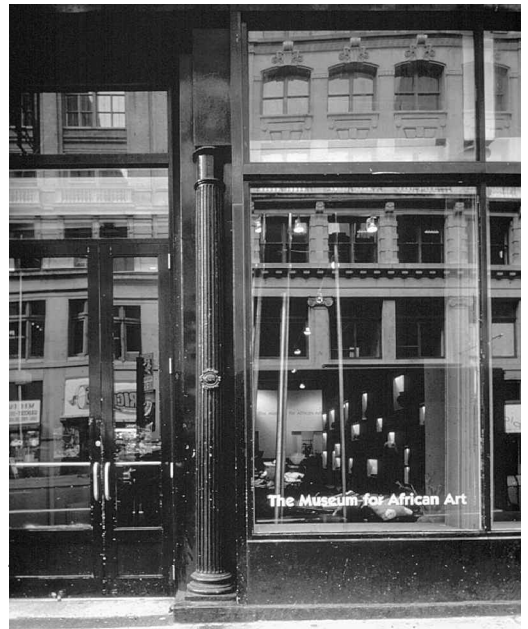
the needs of the Museum's African art collectors/board members. Yet there may be cause for optimism. The 1998 appointment of Elsie Crum McCabe as the Museum's Executive President may mark a new beginning.

To return to "Race for Sale," Hilden claims that the Museum for African Art's exhibits uphold a "universalist aesthetic" without interrogating the Western canon itself, never questioning "the truth of Western absolutes upon which all such aesthetic judgements depend." But contrary to how Hilden portrays her, Susan Vogel is far from oblivious to these debates. As Vogel states in *Exhibition-ism*, "Obviously the exclusion or inclusion of African objects from the canon of world art has complex political ramifications" (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:82). Further, while Hilden superficially invokes the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a deeper engagement with his ideas points to possibilities which her argument does not allow.

Ngũgĩ's interrogation of Eurocentrism asks how the colonized can "free themselves from the Eurocentric basis of their vision" (1993:4). And though this is not one of the answers he proposes, one possible answer to this question might be, "By looking at African art." But then, of course, the answer cannot be so simple, nor such a transparent vision so readily accessible. When it comes to looking at African art, colonized Africans and people of African ancestry are often as influenced by misconceptions generated by negative stereotypes invented by Europeans as Europeans themselves. But, as Ngũgĩ describes, during the 1960s a radical break took place, permitting people to see beyond Eurocentrism. As Ngũgĩ notes, prior to challenges to the "mainstream" made by peoples of Africa, Asia, and South America, the "study of the humanities meant literally the humanity contained in the canonized tradition of European critical and imaginative literature and, further, confined within the linguistic boundaries of each of the colonizing nations" (6).

In Africa, as everywhere, culture helps define what it means to be human. Thus, objects from Africa, even removed from their original cultural contexts, and categorized as art in the West, have the potential to communicate African cultural ideals. The life-sustaining, beneficial nature of African sculpture is contained in its forms and contributes to its aesthetic effect. As stated repeatedly in texts that accompany exhibits of African art, such works once promoted the social well-being of communities, facilitating harmonious relationships among people, and between people and the environment as well as ancestral and spiritual realms. Even removed from its original contexts, African art has the power to communicate socially therapeutic values cross-culturally to people of all ages, transcending differences of race, gender, and class, and uniting generations, living and deceased. Thus, given the potential of African art to represent the humanity of African people, no matter who is in charge of its display, one might see all exhibitions of African art, even their very existence, as a challenge to the Western canon and the supposed absolutes upon which it is based.³

But while the rhetoric of "aesthetic quality" can potentially be used to serve the greater good, more often it plays into systems of commodification. Just how much value does African art have as a commodity? A recent query posed to the H-NET List for African Expressive Culture, regarding the value



3. & 4. In 1984, the Center for African Art opened on the Upper East Side with its inaugural exhibition African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme (plate 3). In 1993, the Center, now the Museum for African Art, moved to its current location at 593 Broadway in SoHo (plate 4). (Photos courtesy of The Museum for African Art)

of the African art market to the U.S. economy indicated that for 1998 the total amount for African and Oceanic art, lumped together, sold at auction by Sotheby's was \$8.5 million. The total from a May 1999 sale was \$5.4 million. The highest price ever paid for a single African sculpture was \$3.4 million in 1990 for the *Bangwa Queen* figure from the Franklin collection.³ Whatever figure one might imagine as the value of the African art market, the amount is only a fraction of what African art is worth to the economies of European and African nations. What would charting the course of the rising value of African art in international markets throughout the 20th century reveal? And what impact has the buying and selling of African art had on the lives of individuals in the West and in Africa?⁴

In her critique of *The Art of Collecting African Art* exhibition, Hilden calls attention to how collectors' testimonies never "so much as imply that a knowledge of Africa, of the realities of the people who made *their* objects, mattered." Sculptures are "detached completely from African people, African time, and African place." Overall, Hilden is correct in this assertion. As Vogel notes in her catalogue essay, "the collecting of African art follows long-established Western patterns of collecting what is not only culturally distant, but temporally remote." She explains:

Collectors may be disconcerted by the idea that sculptures like those in their living rooms could be dancing today in Africa. The sweaty reality of use and sense of things recently removed from their origins affront both aesthetic and ethical scruples. The elevation of African art to the status akin to that of antiquities ennobles and aestheticizes it, and also moves it further from a possibly questionable recent traffic in cultural property, with its sordid implications of theft or purchase at low prices from poor people. (1988:4)

Accordingly, the precolonial aesthetic, so highly valued by collectors such as Brian Leyden, is at least in part a figment of the collector's imagination. Explaining why visiting contemporary Africa is of no interest to him, Leyden states, in comments included in *The Art of Collecting African Art*, "if Addidas sneakers and Sony Walkmen were absent from the Ivory Coast, I might reconsider my position, but, at present, my romantic vision of precolonial Ivory Coast is too fragile to tamper with" (Vogel 1988:58). Thus, as Western definitions of African art fixate on masks and figures made during the precolonial era, though collected largely during the colonial era, Africa is denied both a contemporary reality and a historical past.

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian suggests that "it takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West [...] if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of its Other" (1983:35). In staging shows that began to break open narrow definitions of African art, the Museum, under Vogel's leadership and in the face of considerable opposition, set its sight on dismantling this temporal fortress. Some of the exhibitions that worked to take down the pre- and postcolonial wall imprisoning African art include: *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory* (1988); *Yoruba: Nine Hundred Years of African Art and Thought* (1989); *Africa Explores: Twentieth Century African Art* (1991); *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (1993); *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale* (1993); *Home and the World: Architectural Sculpture by Two Contemporary African Artists* (1993); *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (1996); *Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention* (1996); *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes* (1997); *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art* (1999); and, in at least a flawed way, *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art of South Africa* (1999).⁵

Together, these exhibitions show an increasing interest in all facets of Africa's history from its ancient civilizations to contemporary culture, including ties to the African diaspora. When exhibitions present African art detached from both historical and contemporary realities, as excised abstractions, museums become, as Hilden suggests, "forgetting machines." Instead, museums must nurture "long memories."

As Vogel stated in a 1995 BBC video on African art, *Through African Eyes*:

African art cannot be divorced from the fact that it is made by Black people. It's made by people with a fraught history. It's been exhibited in museums in the wealthiest cities in the world. It comes from some of the poorest nations in the world today. None of this is very far beneath the surface. It's intimately tied up with the history of colonialism and racism, slavery, the whole nine yards. It's a very complicated history and no one looks at a piece of African art with that history completely submerged. (in Forna 1995)

But despite Vogel's statement, in reality, until quite recently, most exhibitions and publications of African art avoided these subjects, particularly the history of the enslavement of African peoples.

Moreover, the history of the commodification of African art as inextricably implicated in the history of the enslavement of African people is rarely acknowledged. These histories run parallel. The removal of vast cultural resources from Africa to the West is in some ways a repeat performance of the history of the enslavement of African peoples. Capitalism is deeply implicated in both.

In a review of the 1996 *Africa: The Art of a Continent* exhibition at the Guggenheim, Michele Wallace describes African art exhibits as "a perfect place to have a good cry" (1997:168). She describes how the study of museum and gallery collections of African art "should be formulated, at least for citizens of the Diaspora and all of our friends, in the context of mourning the soul death of our ancestors and, admittedly, as a sign of our cultural decimation" (168). Thus, museums that exhibit African art become, at least for some, in part "a place to mourn" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:139). Yet, like all museums, museums that exhibit African art must serve not only this but also other functions. With diverse responsibilities to their publics, such institutions must be many things at once, including: "a laboratory for creating new knowledge," "a school dedicated to the creation of an informed citizenry," "a forum for public debate, where controversial topics can be subjected to informed discussion," "a tribunal" on denial of the African Holocaust, and a "memory palace," as well as a place "to celebrate" (138, 139).

Moyo Okediji's formulations make it clear why it is necessary for museums that exhibit African art to be particularly attentive to the history of the enslavement of African peoples and its legacies. He asks, "How many 'slaves,' how many fellow Africans, were exchanged for each of the *manillas* used to cast the Benin objects currently confiscated in the African Diasporas?" and answers, "Perhaps, then, it is the progeny of those whose bodies were sold to pay for the raw materials who deserve the works" (1998:8–9). Further, he elaborates:

I wish only to investigate the relationship, if there is one, between the body of African arts in exile and the masses of blacks in the Diaspora. The objects are the visual signifiers of the triangular trade, while constituting the idioms of a Diaspora culture whose aesthetic is largely unwritten. [...]

The middle passage of these objects is a metaphor for the earlier Middle Passage inscribed in capitals, containing human cargo. This metaphor institutes a corporeal relationship between African art in Western

5. French artist Arman often uses African sculptures as the raw material of his art—treating it in much the same way as the mass-produced, factory-made Western objects he also uses as raw material. This accumulation of Kota reliquary figures was exhibited in the Museum for African Art's 1997 African Faces, African Figures: The Arman Collection. (Photo courtesy of The Museum for African Art)

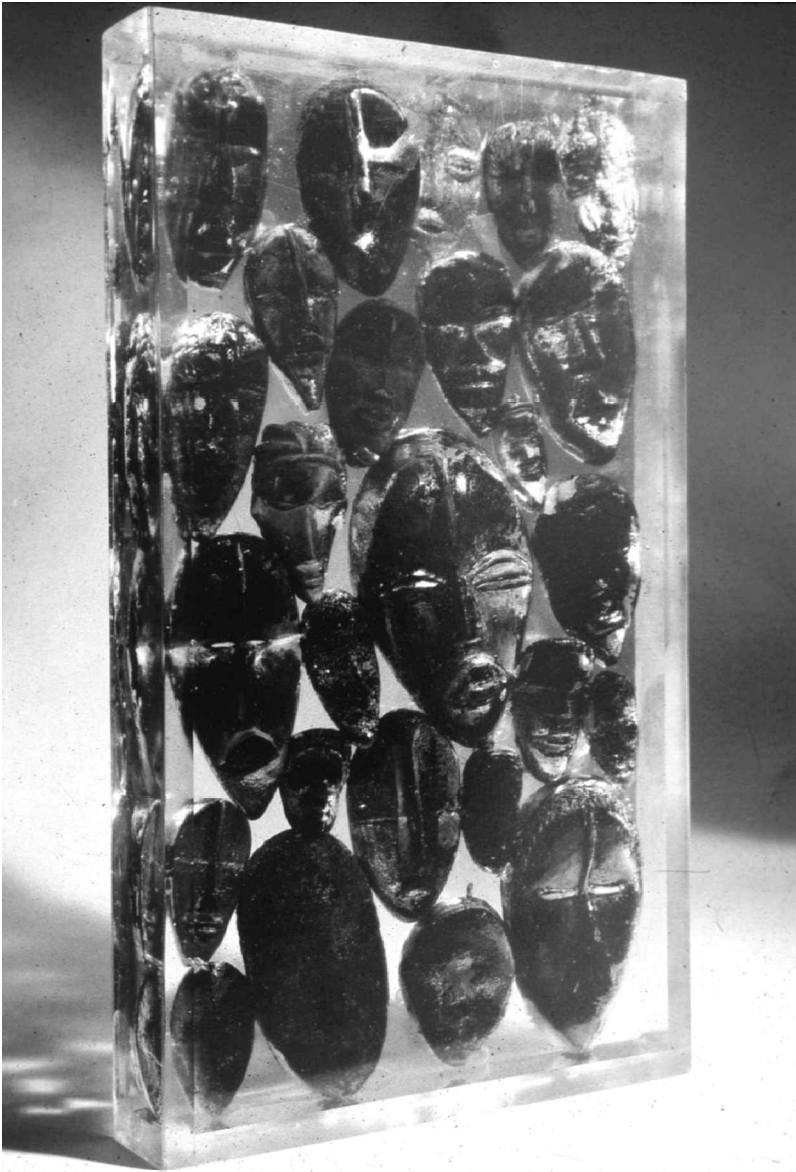
collections and African Americans. The art and the people might not have arrived together at the same time, on the same ships, but both have suffered the same fate of displacement. [...] Many of them were accidentally fragmented and their parts misplaced, or otherwise inadvertently injured when they were packed and shipped. A substantial number were intentionally stripped to make them more suitable for presentation in collections in the West. Acting as a sort of tail to the tenure of slavery, the middle passage of the art object intensified as the transportation of the human cargo dwindled to a trickle and finally terminated.

Since the objects' arrival in the United States, they have been caged, displayed on blocks and pedestals, or auctioned from hand to hand like the human cargoes which they followed across the Atlantic Ocean. It was the trauma of the Middle Passage and the trials and triumphs of daily life in the Diaspora that transformed Africans into African Americans, stripping them of the comfort of their indigenous tongues as well as other cultural properties while presenting them with different possibilities and limitations in an exotic physical and emotional landscape. [...]

But the objects also show that they have overcome, and thus they have continued to teach the West a lasting lesson about life, while transforming the history of its cultural forms well beyond the point acknowledged by many Westerners. (1998:8, 9)

Given this parallel history and the fact that African art is often attributed with the ability to “promote the well-being of communities,” a phrase frequently repeated in texts that accompany African art exhibitions, what impact did the hemorrhaging of works of art from Africa have on African societies? What accountability do museums and collectors, both thoroughly implicated in these histories, have toward Africa today? And, of course, what relationships do peoples of the African diaspora have with these performing objects?





6. *Arman's Accumulation of Souls (1972) is composed of Dan masks embedded in polyester. Arman's extreme use of accumulation as an aesthetic practice constitutes a breach that throws light on more "normal" collecting practices. (Photo courtesy of Arman)*

As the enslavement of African people severed ties with ancestral homelands, and dispersed families and communities indiscriminately throughout the diaspora, objects lacking cultural identification that were taken from Africa during the colonial era were scattered throughout the West. Groups of objects taken from the same place were dispersed; ensembles were disassembled; figures were disrobed and marked with acquisition numbers; pairs of figures, representing couples, were separated. Museum storerooms hold the bulk of these still only partially catalogued collections. Similarly, private collectors' closets, pantries, and bank vaults store large reserves of African art. Thus, the general public sees only the tip of the iceberg of the 'primitive accumulation' of African sculpture in the West, to invoke Marx's term as inflected by Cedric Robinson's reinterpretation of the odd pairing of these two words.

As Robinson states, “Marx had once assigned slavery to that stage of capitalism’s development which he characterized as ‘primitive accumulation.’” But, while Robinson explains that Marx “had not meant the term in any invidious sense but had intended simply to—in part—emphasize that the dominant capitalist mode of production bore little responsibility for production and reproduction of the human materials it commanded in its aspect,” Marx did not realize the full implications of his own formulation (1983:173). He did not foresee that together, the Industrial Revolution and the further development of the capitalist society would create a “need for primitive accumulation translated into slavery on a massive scale” (210) that would eventually cause its internal breakdown, at least in one of its phases. As he concludes, “whatever the forms primitive accumulation assumed, its social harvest would also include acts of resistance, rebellion, and, ultimately, revolution” (219). For, Marx had not realized fully that the cargos of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargos, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated blanks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past which had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension.

This was the embryo of the demon that would be visited on the whole enterprise of primitive accumulation. It would be through the historical and social consciousness of these Africans that the trade in slaves and the system of slave labor was infected with its contradiction (173).

The ongoing acquisition of African “art” objects newly made for the trade might be seen as a further elaboration of Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation. Across Africa, and throughout the West, tons of sculptures circulate, created in response to the West’s voracious appetite for African “art.” Art traders provide an endless supply of ever more monstrous objects. This proliferation of mass-produced sculptures sows the seeds of its own destruction. Replicas and “fine fakes” made for the trade on a massive scale contribute to a rapid reduction of African arts’ transformative potential. Created in response to the West’s limited understanding of what African art is, these commodities drain African art of its efficacy as performing objects.

Robinson describes that throughout the African diaspora, during centuries past, the “struggle against slavery was [...] transferred into the battle to preserve the collective identity of African peoples” (184). He concludes the chapter “The Historical Archaeology of the Black Radical Tradition” with the statement that the “peoples of Africa and the African diaspora had endured an integrating experience which left them not only with a common task but a shared vision” (222). Linking the historical experiences of peoples of the African diaspora to the contemporary reality of the removal of African art from the continent gives this vision, integral to the formation of the Black radical tradition, even greater force as a catalyst for transformative social change at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It may help counter the ultimate effect of white Europe on Asia and Africa, described by Wright, as quoted by Robinson, “to cast millions into a kind of spiritual void” (431).

In “Race for Sale,” Hilden observes that within museum exhibits African art and the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora are often conflated. Sculptures become surrogates for black bodies. As its title suggests, the Museum for African Arts 1997 exhibition *African Faces, African Figures: The Arman Collection* provides a case in point. Within the exhibition, sets of sculptures of the same type were grouped together. Shoulder-to-shoulder, in close quarters, rather than isolated from one another, the exhibition included sets of Kota

and Fang reliquary guardian figures, Mende masks from Sierra Leone, and Kongo *nkisi* sculptures. Armand Arman applies the same aesthetic principle he uses in making art—that of accumulation—to collecting African art.

Arman often uses African sculpture as the raw material of his art, treating it in much the same way as the mass-produced, factory-made Western objects he also uses as raw material. As Roberta Smith describes, “Arman became famous for accumulative reliefs and sculptures, works of art that mass together everyday objects [...] by the dozens, if not the hundreds.” His art “mirrors our consumer culture almost too accurately” (1997:E39).

The Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 *Primitivism* exhibition included a 1972 Arman work. An accumulation of Dan “passport” masks encased in resin, the work is poignantly titled *Accumulation of Souls*. More recently, as noted in a review of the exhibition of his African art collection, Arman “has [...] taken African sculptures he considers inferior or fake and cut them up for use in his own works” (Smith 1997:E39). In one work, Arman decapitated a group of sculptures from Eastern Nigeria, placing them in a plexiglass case, with room to breathe, heads shelved above and bodies below. Another of his accumulations consists of Makonde masks from Mozambique sliced in half bilaterally and grouped together as a relief sculpture within a flat, rectangular wall case. In a huge work, he assembled a group of Fon *asen*, iron altars, from the Republic of Benin, to form a shape that resembles a gigantic dandelion puff. Arman’s actions, because they are so extreme, constitute a breach that throws light on more “normal” collecting practices. Like other collectors of African art, Arman maintains a formalist approach to these works, while—to a greater or lesser degree—mutilating them.

In one of her essays in *Exhibition-ism*, the catalogue for the last exhibition she curated as Director of the Museum for African Art, an exhibit that commemorated the 10th anniversary of the institution, Vogel states that after more than 20 years of involvement exhibiting African art, she began to see this experience as “increasingly vitiated” (Nooter Roberts and Vogel 1994:115). In *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*, Vogel describes how she was forced to recognize that Baule understandings and appreciations of objects called “art” in the West were the opposite of those she had learned from a Western museum culture. She states:

theirs focused on the spiritual presence associated with the object, and were only marginally concerned with the physical form of the object, while mine placed high value on the tangible, man-made art object and involved the suspicion that the metaphysical dimension was not available—even vicariously. (1997:17)

This is the tension that exhibitions of African art have yet to resolve.

Notes

1. As satirized by Ishmael Reed in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* “America, Europe’s last hope, the protector of the archives of ‘mankind’s’ achievements had come down with a bad case of *Jes Grew* and *Mu’tafikah* too. Europe can no longer guard the ‘fetishes’ of civilizations which were placed in the various Centers of Art Detention, located in New York City” (1972:15).
2. In her “Introduction” to the 1986 *African Aesthetics* exhibition catalogue, Vogel states unequivocally that:

Presenting to the public African art of such high aesthetic quality is one of The Center’s goals.

But our purposes go beyond the presentation of beautiful works of art. African art has been admired for a long time—acknowledged as the equal of our own—without a corresponding recognition of the people who produced it or the intellectual processes from which it results. [...] African art is seldom understood as the creation of artists who work within a critical aesthetic system. (1986:ix)

She goes on to ask:

What are the criteria for evaluating African art? Who establishes them? What are they based on? Are they the same as the artists who created the works, or of their patrons? [...]

Clearly the criteria we use are our own, formed by a late-twentieth-century sensibility and informed by the study of African art. We would, however, like to think that the works we most admire are those that best fulfilled the artists' intentions, those that, when they were made, were considered excellent. We shall attempt here to explore the aesthetic criteria African art objects were meant to satisfy in the societies from which they come. (xi)

In its early history the Museum presented two "masterpiece" exhibitions, *African Masterpieces from the Musee de l'Homme*, its 1984 inaugural show, and *African Masterpieces from Munich* of 1987. Subsequent to 1987, when I joined the staff, in discussing possibilities for future exhibitions, Vogel made it explicit that the Museum's mission went beyond presenting exhibitions of "masterpieces." In her words, the museum's exhibitions should be about "ideas."

3. While another response to this query also failed to propose an actual figure for the total sum of the value of African art to the U.S. economy, it suggested that an estimation could be made by adding together the gross incomes of African art dealers in the U.S., adding to that the total value of donations to the nation's museums, plus the sum of individual sales, the impact of the secondary market, and the cost of housing and maintaining African art collections <h-afarts@h-net.msu.edu>.
4. To cite a fairly well-known case from quite close at hand, one of the Museum's former board members states quite openly that thanks to their African art collection, he and his wife were able to have a luxurious new house built for themselves. The same individual also attributes the longevity of his marriage in part to their collecting activity. This anecdote makes me wonder in how many instances the presence of African sculptures in people's bedrooms function in a way similar to the figure of the black woman in Manet's *Olympia*? Visiting the African art collections of private individuals I have often noted the presence of African sculpture in people's bedrooms. In all fairness, it is important to note that in many cases this is inevitable since African art collections spill into all rooms of the house, sometimes even into the bathroom. See Halle (1993:155) for more on that last point, particularly as it pertains to Republicans.
5. Exhibitions organized by other institutions have also worked in various ways to encourage a broader understanding of the importance of African art's temporal and historical dimensions. For example, in 1989, the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC, presented *Echoes of the Kalabari: Sculpture by Sokari Douglas Camp* in conjunction with *Foreheads of the Dead: An Anthropological View of Kalabari Ancestral Screens*. In 1993, the same institution presented *Astonishment and Power: The Eyes of Understanding Kongo Minkisi* with *Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme: The Art of Renee Stout*. In 1997, the National Museum presented *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsuka Group*, and in 1998 presented *Olowe of Ise: A Sculpture to Kings*. In 1990, the American Museum of Natural History in New York presented *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*, and more recently presented *Play and Display: Sculpture by Sokari Douglas Camp* which originated at the British Museum in London in 1995. In the past decade UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History has organized: *Representing Women: Sande Masquerades of Sierra Leone* (1995); *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995); *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African-American Identity* (1998); and *Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe* (1998). In London, in 1995, the Barbican presented *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex*. In 1998, institutions in France and Africa collaboratively organized *Vallees du Niger*. The widespread presentation of exhibitions of African photography, from the Guggenheim's *Insight: Afri-*

can Photographs, 1940 to the Present to Gagosian gallery's immensely popular exhibitions of the work of Seydou Keita in New York to the Barbican's presentation of *Africa by Africans: A Photographic View* in London in 1999, is further evidence of an increasing interest in historical processes as they pertain to Africa.

References

- Fabian, Johannes
1983 *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Forna, Aminatta, dir.
1995 *Through African Eyes*. London: BBC/RM Productions.
- Foucault, Michel
1980 *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon.
- Freire, Paulo
1993 [1970] *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Hall, Stuart
1997 *Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage and the Open University.
- Halle, David
1993 *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hilden, Patricia Penn
2000 "Race for Sale: Narratives of Possession in Two 'Ethnic' Museums." *TDR* 44, 3 (T167):11–36.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara
1998 *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lavine, Steven
1989 "Museums and Multiculturalism." *Museum News*, March/April:36–42.
- Mudimbe, V.Y.
1986 "African Art As a Question Mark." *African Studies Review* 29, 1 (March):3–4.
- Nooter Roberts, Mary, and Susan Vogel
1994 *Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art*. New York: The Museum for African Art.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
1993 *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Okediji, Moyo
1998 "On Reparations: Exodus and Embodiment." *African Arts* 31, 2:8–10.
- Reed, Ishmael
1972 *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Atheneum.
- Robinson, Cedric
1983 *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Zed Press.
- Schildkraut, Enid and Curtis Keim, eds.
1998 *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Roberta
1997 "A Connoisseur's African Choices." *The New York Times*, 17 October:E39.
- Vogel, Susan
1986 *African Aesthetics*. New York: The Center for African Art.
1988 *The Art of Collecting African Art*. New York: The Center for African Art.
1997 *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Wallace, Michele

1997 "The Prison House of Culture: Why African Art? Why the Guggenheim? Why Now?" *Black Renaissance* 1, 2 (Summer/Fall):162–75.

Carol Thompson is a PhD candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Tisch School of the Arts/NYU. In 1988, she received an MA in art history with a specialization in African Art from the University of Iowa. From 1987 to 1996 she worked for the Museum for African Art in various capacities, from Curator for Education to Associate Curator. She is the author of *African Art Portfolio: An Illustrated Introduction* (New Press, 1993). Currently she teaches in the art departments at City College and Vassar.