At Converging Obsolescences: The Case for Exhibition-Performance in African Art-Music-Dance

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In the African gallery at the Denver Art Museum, a Yoruba Egungun mask is exhibited with the following terse label: "Mask (Egungun) / 1950s / Wood, paint, cloth / Artist not known / Yoruba culture, Nigeria." To imitate dance, the Egungun is mounted on a slowly rotating motorized pole; the fabric of its costume is specially arranged to indicate twirling. These kinetically suggestive touches verge on the unconventional, but Denver's Egungun mostly provides what museum visitors have come to expect from African art: exotic names, vague dates, unknown artists, and perhaps some dry text. In other words, substantive discourse surrounding traditional African art in museums tends to be absent or inaccessible, as objects are framed in decontextualizing displays that seem to have little bearing on contemporary life. This state of affairs amounts to what I will identify here as five obsolescences now converging around traditional African art in the West. I will then aim to counter those obsolescences with a proposed curatorial project.

Several key terms must first be addressed. For the present purposes I am defining traditional art as connected to indigenous cultural practice.[1] By contrast, contemporary art will be characterized by more recent (twentieth- and twenty-first-century) origins, fusions of local and outside influences, and creation impetuses fueled by international markets. Similarly, traditional performance will be defined as deriving from indigenous practice, regardless of whether manifesting in villages, urban spaces, or concert halls. This latter form—staged traditional performance (known as 'ballet' in francophone West Africa)—will be considered distinctly from contemporary African dance, which maintains closer ties to Western modern dance. These definitions could be debated at length, but for now they must suffice as working terms. Noting that there will always be fluid exchange between the traditional and the contemporary, I believe these categories effectively describe different arenas that operate for the most part separately, each with distinct critical standards.

Five Converging Obsolescences

I. One of the obsolescences currently converging around traditional African art in the West is the growing irrelevance of serious criticism in a booming international art scene driven by glossy magazines and trend-setting galleries and museums. To quote Rosalind Krauss from a 2002 *October* journal "Round Table" discussion: "Dealers…used to feel that the work of art didn't exist in a discursive vacuum, that it was given its existence in part by critical discourse, and therefore there was a need for catalogs with serious essays by critics. That perceived need, on the part of both the artist and the dealer, seems to have diminished… to the point where the

institution of those catalogs has for the most part disappeared."[2] This lack of what Krauss calls "serious" (historically and theoretically inclined) criticism means that artworks—and particularly older works from distant regions—face greater challenges in being complexly understood.

II. From another direction, Africa's traditional objects seem to have long outgrown their supposed moment of intersection with modernity, embodied in an encounter with Picasso and others during the early twentieth century.[3] Susan Vogel notes that today, "Art that was once sexy, exciting, and wild has now become familiar, domesticated. What had been 'primitive' has become 'classical' not only in name but in the way it is experienced—if it once excited passions, it now commands respect, making it seem a little colder, older, more remote, and maybe a little boring."[4] Sylvester Ogbechie additionally laments that canons of traditional African art "fossilize cultural practice and prevent the emergence of alternative forms."[5] In other words, well-established canons lead art historians and viewing publics to understand traditional objects only through the prism of old, historical, and outmoded forms, disregarding their current manifestations. Ogbechie calls this "the problem of discursive obsolescence."[6]

III. A third obsolescence is the "white cube" that continues to frame African objects in museums.[7] A statement by William Rubin, former curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, is emblematic of the white cube's ideology:

> I look at my tribal pieces every day, and I look at them hard. Those that remain have passed the acid test. I am heartless. I make no allowances. These guys [African sculptors] have to be as good as Picasso and Brancusi or they don't interest me. I'm obviously only interested in them for something they have that by definition transcends their origins. Picasso once said to me that he never read anything about African art; he said, "Everything I need to know about Africa is in those pieces." What Picasso meant by that is that the real genius and spirit of a civilization comes through in its art without one having to know that much about it.[8]

Many such statements by Rubin and others have been widely criticized, but the white cube remains standard—prompting (in one instance) the Houston-based artists' collective Otabenga Jones & Associates to stage the action *Africa Is a Continent* (2005) in protest of the exhibition *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection* at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. While not necessarily indicative of any growing mainstream concern about museum practices, the action expressed at least one group's strong dissatisfaction with Eurocentric representations of African art.[9] In providing no cultural context, the white cube displays

forms but risks reinforcing Western stereotypes and value systems, while traditional art is perceived as obsolete because it is only superficially understood.

IV. A fourth obsolescence derives not only from the museum's general failure to explain the traditional artwork's historical and cultural backdrop, but also from its inability to convey the object's most immediate setting—its performance context. Traditional African masks, in particular, are almost always created for a broader, interactive environment in which art, music, dance, theater, and other elements merge to constitute a single creative realm.[10] Thus a mask's aesthetic force as well as its social meaning reside not quintessentially in form, but in performance.[11]

To address this problem, some museums have installed either video monitors showing clips of village masquerades or, as in the case of the Denver Art Museum's Yoruba Egungun mask discussed earlier, a mechanized apparatus to imitate dance. However, anyone who has encountered actual African performance will recognize the inadequacy of such efforts (despite their good intentions). Thus traditional masks show up as obsolete in Western collections because, even when accompanied by video or moving machinery, they are exhibited *sans* the elements that give them life.

V. A fifth obsolescence is meanwhile occurring as disjunctures in African performance—a vast terrain that I will limit, for the present purposes, to francophone West Africa, which is arguably the most important region for a discussion of globally touring African staged productions. West African 'ballet' performance—which has little in common with European ballet save for its setting on the proscenium stage—employs traditional music, masks, theatrics, and dance to represent historical narratives, ceremonies, folktales, and present-day allegories. In part because it features the traditional performers/storytellers/oral historians known as *griots*, West African ballet can be considered a contemporary form of history-telling.

Ballet's roots can be traced to an elite French colonial school, the École William Ponty, near Dakar, Senegal, where from 1933 to 1948 performance was integrated into the curriculum partly to enrich education, but also to satisfy colonial curiosity for indigenous cultures and to avoid grooming "rootless intellectuals" who might eventually try to buck the colonial system.[12] In the 1950s, the first internationally recognized African performance troupe emerged in Paris, headed by a Guinean Ponty graduate named Fodéba Keita, and was dually guided by the aesthetics of Negritude and the trendy European hunger for *art nègre*.[13] In tours of Europe and especially the US, Keita's *Ballets Africains* also resonated with growing concerns for African independence and civil rights. After Guinea achieved independence in 1958, Keita returned home, where his troupe became the National Ballet—the top ensemble in a socialist-inspired national arts system founded by Guinea's first president Sékou Touré.[14] Fodéba Keita's troupe ultimately provided the model for parallel organizations in Senegal, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire.[15] Through

far-ranging and relentless touring, the ballets of francophone West Africa have generated the majority of the West's popular contact with traditional African performance.

Today West Africa's ballet arts have reached a critical crossroads. Government funding for national troupes has largely evaporated, leading hundreds of the most talented performers to emigrate to the West, where they remain disconnected both from younger generations of artists in Guinea and from traditional objects in Western collections.[16] Overall, this situation has engendered a new set of challenges: Can African arts thrive under Western patronage, or will foreign interest simply serve as a cultural drain? With limited contact between generations of artists and between objects and artists, is traditional staged performance headed for obsolescence?

The Case for Exhibition-Performance

We must confront a disquieting incapacity in current Africanist art history: scholars and curators can describe performance in words, and they can analyze the problems of museum display, but so far they have not successfully presented traditional arts in their full contexts. The field begs for a union between scholarship, exhibition, and performance.

It must first be acknowledged that Frederick Lamp leads the way in directly addressing this set of problems. In his recent book, *See the Music Hear the Dance*, Lamp stresses the sensory aspects of objects and performance, concluding that African arts may be most productively studied and represented by interdisciplinary research teams.[17] Following up on these assessments, Lamp's current project is "Woman, Fire, Ambition, and Desire: The Performance of the Great Baga D'mba"—an interdisciplinary collaboration between Lamp, four additional scholars and two documentary artists to produce a multi-media exhibition.[18] According to Lamp, "This will be the first attempt to look at a single African performance genre from the perspective of seven disciplines, and the first attempt to present these in an integrated manner."[19]

Another art historian, Susan Vogel, is addressing the challenges of representing African art in fuller contexts via a move to documentary filmmaking. At a conference in Florida in March 2007, Vogel offered three reasons why scholars and curators of African art might consider working with film. One reason, she said, is political: Although geography, national borders and other factors keep Africa distant from the West, film enables viewers to vicariously traverse those boundaries. Another reason is aesthetic/temporal/spatial: Film can help restore objects' full performance contexts. Third, film opens a window to the contemporary, presenting a direct picture of what is happening in Africa now.[20]

Building on foundations established by Vogel and Lamp, I propose to explore post-colonial Guinean arts through a combination white-cube exhibition and multi-media stage performance incorporating masquerade, costume, music, dance, lighting, sound, and projection of video, still images, and

text. The project aims to investigate the complex role of art in Guinean nation-building. Specifically it examines the ethnic origins and functions of masquerade, the governmental appropriation of masks in state-sponsored imagery and spectacle, and exchanges between Guinea and the West surrounding art, identity, nationalism, masks, and culture in the broadest sense.

As the title "exhibition-performance" suggests, this format consists of two spaces. Visitors first enter the exhibition space—a white cube allowing for formal contemplation of masks displayed in cases and accompanied by minimal text. At an appointed time, visitors then find their seats in the second space, the performance hall, where they become an audience, and where the exhibition's masks appear throughout the course of a full-length performance created by African ballet artists, a choreographer, an art historian, and production designers. The idea is to first encounter African masks within a Western space (the white cube), then to engulf visitors in the masks' space (the performance).

Broadly speaking, exhibition-performance can help close the current gap between "high-art" curators and their publics by enabling ballet artists—with music, dance, and performance expertise, and in collaboration with research, choreography, and audio-visual technology—to convey aesthetics and information quickly, engage wide audiences, and enable a more complete sensory appreciation of traditional masquerade.[21] I will now summarize five arguments for exhibition-performance as a countermeasure against the five above-outlined obsolescences.

i.

OBSOLESCENCE: Irrelevance of Serious Art Criticism

RESPONSE: Recuperating the Discursive Voice

Art production continually evolves to incorporate new themes, materials, techniques, and technologies, and to reflect social realities. The same must hold true for the strategies of art curators, scholars, and critics. In the realm of traditional African art, I believe the three positions of curator, scholar, and critic intertwine and are not entirely separable. Thus, when Andrea Fraser speaks of a need for serious critics to compete "with popular culture, with glossy magazines, with commercial entertainment complexes for audiences," this could be taken as a challenge to not only exhibit African artworks engagingly, but also, simultaneously, to cultivate a sophisticated and substantial discursive presence, and to preserve a critical stance toward dominant ideologies.[22]

Theoretically speaking, exhibition-performance seeks to expand Africanist art history to incorporate the growing field of visual studies.[23] This link to visual culture may prove vital in enabling art historians to increase vocality within the mainstream and vie with popular culture. The suggestion is not for art historians to "dumb down" their work for mass audiences, but rather to seek approaches that link artworks to lived experience. Practically speaking, the

proposed multi-media performance physically materializes discourse by connecting masks to representations of their contexts by way of dance, music, and audio-visual projection.[24]

ii.

OBSOLESCENCE: African Art No Longer 'Modern'

RESPONSE: Bridging Divides in Africanist Art History

In the last several decades, breakthroughs in African art studies have revealed the multi-influenced, modernized, performance-based, and political aspects of traditional arts.[25] Yet, despite these breakthroughs, a number of dualisms continue to partition the field. First, the category of "traditional art" is often assumed to contain that which is old or dead, while "contemporary art" (paintings, found-object sculpture, etc.) seems exclusively to hold that which is alive and cutting-edge.[26] Second, the categories of "traditional" and "contemporary" also govern academic concentrations, encouraging young scholars to seek out new and specialized but easily classifiable research niches.[27] Third, even in the field of traditional African art, deeply entrenched boundaries serve to separate so-called "authentic" (old/"pure"/canonized/ valuable) artworks from their "inauthentic" (newer/Western-influenced/popular/commonplace) counterparts.[28] Along these lines, staged performance—perhaps because it is considered "diluted" or "popularized"—has attracted very little scholarly attention.[29] Fourth, a division in African art studies exists between aesthetics and politics. As Simon Ottenberg puts it, scholarship on traditional African art tends to "depoliticize" artworks in order to "show the positive and cohesive view of African life."[30]

Exhibition-performance seeks to bridge each of the four above-mentioned conceptual divides by focusing on modernized, politicized, staged, and geographically displaced arts. By viewing African masquerade in contemporary lights, the proposed format aims to defy the current seeming outdatedness of traditional artworks. If, as Susan Vogel observes, these objects have indeed come to be perceived as boring, it may be because they continue to be framed, as Sylvester Ogbechie notes, according to past practices and eras that have little bearing on contemporary life in either Africa or the West. Bringing traditional arts into the present acknowledges the hybrid and sometimes contradictory aspects that comprise their contemporary relevance.

iii. / iv.

OBSOLESCENCES: The White Cube / No Performance Context

RESPONSE: The White Cube and Performance

The field of Africanist art history disagrees on whether to privilege the art object's form or its context. For the African-art-as-modern-art cohort, formal qualities are of preeminent importance. On the other side, projects like Frederick Lamp's aim to represent artworks' full contexts. Interestingly, both sides believe that reconstituting traditional performance

would prove futile.[31] This stance comes as no surprise from modernist curators like William Rubin, but for Lamp, denying the possibility of live performance means overlooking the longstanding African ballet praxis of reinterpreting village contexts.

Ultimately, white-cube exhibitions privilege form but often leave Western viewers unaware of objects' full expressivity, history, and cultural significance. On the other hand, museum displays reliant on panel texts and audio-visual reproductions convey a great deal more information but also bear the experiential and perceptual limitations that come with flat video screens and lengthy labels.[32] Although making no claims to "authentically" recreate traditional contexts (whatever that would mean), the concept of exhibition-performance suggests that museums need not choose between form and context.

v.

OBSOLESCENCES: Disjunctures in African Performance

RESPONSE: Agency Through Collaboration

Another divide exists between Western institutions and the African artists whose works they display. If the issue of African artists' agency continues to underlie much debate in African art history, it is perhaps because the field's origins lie embedded in colonial practice.[33] Much productive debate has occurred since the field's inception, but many scholars still see African artists locked in a battle for self-articulation.[34] Clearly, the Western art world would benefit not simply from brief interviews and consultations with artists, but from collaborations through which African artists could make significant contributions to exhibition discourse.[35]

For Guinean traditional art, the current situation is unprecedented: Many of the country's finest traditional objects are now in Western collections, and many of the country's most talented performing artists have also moved to the West, but the two contingents do not interact.[36] Exhibition-performance of Guinean masquerade would enable a renewed large-scale collaboration between performers and masks, creating a platform for Guinean artists to represent themselves and their arts.

Some might reasonably ask: If this is a project granting agency to Guinean artists, why are Guinean artists not proposing it themselves? I make no pretenses of attributing the idea of exhibition-performance to Guinean artists. However, the concept's inspiration and many of its particulars derive from an ongoing involvement with a community of Guinean artists and principally with Mamadouba 'Mohamed' Camara, a master drummer formerly of Guinea's National Percussion Ensemble who now lives in New York and accompanies Ron K. Brown's modern dance company, Evidence.[37] An initial apprenticeship with Camara (1998-2001) prompted Fulbright research in Guinea (2003-04), as well as numerous collaborations including, most recently, a multi-media presentation and performance at the Denver Art Museum in April, 2007.[38]

Conclusion

Although exhibition spaces and performance halls are both Western devices, West African artists have, over the past seven decades, appropriated the proscenium stage for re-producing their culture and history. Today, however, the white cube and the conventional African ballet have each individually become obsolete for representing traditional art. The white cube tends to lack a strong discursive voice (or voices) and it fails to evoke context, while African ballet faces a funding crisis that pushes its top performers to the West yet dissociates them from traditional objects and from younger generations of artists. Also—and I regret that I was not able to engage this issue within the present format—conventional ballet productions tend to be misunderstood by Western audiences simply because they fail to translate the most basic meanings of their art forms and narratives.

No culture, in isolation, can produce an artistic representation of itself and then expect it to be complexly understood in another world. Yet this has been the case in African ballet. At the same time, outsiders cannot viably exhibit that culture's objects—enclosed in vitrines, far from their origins and artists, with no dialogue—and expect to generate anything beyond self-serving interpretations. Yet this largely remains the state of African art in Western museums.

The proposed forum of exhibition-performance is a multi-layered collaboration joining objects and artists, museums and production, and African and Western forms of expression. Crucially, the format does not try to dupe visitors into entering an "African village" *à la* Disneyland. On the contrary, by recognizing the currently modernized, politicized, staged, and displaced condition of traditional African arts, the performance constructs itself as a self-conscious montage broadcasting polyphonic voices to simultaneously convey and critique its own produced history. Most importantly, this performance offers a sequence of lived encounters to erode some of the tiresome yet otherwise-sanctioned barriers that exist between viewer and artwork, Westerner and African.

Notes:

I wish to thank Susan Vogel, Zoë Strother, Mamadouba 'Mohamed' Camara, and Emily Lordi for their valuable comments, suggestions, and encouragements.

1. Traditional artworks are often attributed to specific ethnic groups, yet it should be noted that these objects are also products of individual artists, that they have always responded to outside aesthetics and concerns, and that they often transcend ethnic categorization (as in national or cross-cultural urban contexts).

2. Rosalind Krauss speaking in "Roundtable: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 202. Benjamin Buchloh responded in agreement with Krauss, adding that, "The judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access to the apparatus of the culture industry (e.g. the international biennials and group shows) or by the collector's immediate access to the object in the market or at auction" (202). Later in the discussion, Helen Molesworth said, "One thing that strikes me as missing from our conversation is a discussion of how the rise of alternative spaces, the rise of contemporary art museums, and the proliferation of project rooms has changed

the role of the curator. The contemporary curator is now someone who seeks out 'new talent,' not someone who waits to receive that information from elsewhere. I wonder if part of the anxiety felt here on the part of critics—and I'm speaking now as a critic and not a curator—is that the voice of the critic is no longer heard in the space of the museum in the same way. It does not enter into the ear of the curator as an authority proclaiming, 'Listen, I've been out looking and I really know what you should bring into the museum.' Now the museum is willing it seems, to validate more art, and to validate it more quickly than ever before" (219).

3. For the details of that moment see Jean-Louis Paudrat, "Between the Fin-de-Siècle and the Roaring Twenties: The 'Discovery' of African Arts," in *Arts of Africa: 7000 Years of African Art*, ed. Ezio Bassani (Monaco: Grimaldi Forum Monaco and Skira Édition, 2005), 375-394.

4. Susan Vogel, "Whither African Art? Emerging Scholarship at the End of an Age," *African Arts* 38, no. 4 (2005): 15.

5. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, "The Historical Life of Objects: African Art History and the Problem of Discursive Obsolescence," *African Arts* 38, no. 4 (2005): 62.

6. *Ibid*.

7. It should be noted that the "white cube" actually tends to be black or brown in exhibitions of African art (Susan Vogel, personal communication). Here I am using "white cube" as an aphorism for typical exhibition practice—*i.e.*, spotlight-and-pedestal mode. Elena Filipovic observes that this standard exhibition mode also dominates international biennials even though many of these events were founded in reaction to museum conventions and with intentions of representing regional and/or non-Western art. See Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 63-84.

8. William Rubin in *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (New York: Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987), 51-52.

9. The collective reviewed the exhibition but stated that they "were sorely disappointed by the lack of context." See Otabenga Jones & Associates, "African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection," Glasstire (Texas visual art online), http://live.glasstire.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=117&gtsect=Articles &gtcat=Review. As described in the 2006 Whitney Biennial catalog, the group's members rallied outside the museum with placards stating "Africa Is a Continent" and "My Blacknuss [sic] Is Bigger Than Your White Box!" The threat implied by the rally, that it might lead to an invasion of the museum, is emphasized by the latter slogan's play on sexual stereotypes; however, the "white box" is also frames the Western canon and, according to the group's statement, "chooses to represent blackness in diluted form," thus extending the critique, in this instance, to the larger context of art history and representation. See Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, *Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006), 312.

10. Ever since the publication of Robert F. Thompson's book *African Art in Motion* (1974), the field of art history has begun to accept and investigate the interrelated nature of African arts. "Sculpture is not the central art," Thompson explains, "but neither is the dance, for both depend on words and music and even dreams and divination." See Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), xii. In an entry for the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, Frederick Lamp adds: "Dance in Africa cannot be considered apart from other forms of art. In contrast to the compartmentalization of the arts in the West, with our departments of dance, theater, music and the plastic arts, there is simply one art in the traditional African setting, and that art goes by various terms often translated as 'the play,' 'medicine' (as something that effects), or 'the sacred.'" See Lamp, "Aesthetics: African Dance Aesthetics," in *International*

Encyclopedia of Dance, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:13.

11. See Thompson, *African Art in Motion.* See also the many essays in Frederick John Lamp, ed., *See the Music Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art* (New York: Prestel, 2004), as well as Henry John Drewal, "Senses in Understandings of Art," *African Arts* 38 no. 2 (2005): 1, 4, 6, 88, 96.

12. Although performance first took the form of theater at the École Ponty, these productions often incorporated other traditional arts, laying the groundwork for what would emerge as 'ballet' in the 1950s. According to Peggy Sabatier, the French Inspector General of Education Albert Charton "hoped that the limited Africanization of the curriculum would… decrease the chances of creating 'rootless intellectuals,' the *bête noire* of French colonial policy, and enable graduates [who would serve as school teachers and administrators throughout West Africa] to act as more efficient mediators between the French and their African compatriots." See Sabatier, "African Culture and French Colonial Education: The William Ponty School *Cahiers* and Theater," in *[Papers] presented at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association* (African Studies Association, 1975): 76. Stephen Bulman argues that research and performance of local cultures was intended make African students "key workers" who would bring back valuable information about the colonized peoples. Bulman quotes Governor-General Jules Brévié, who wrote in 1931: "We expect the educated natives to reveal to us some of the secrets of their peoples' soul, to guide our mission…" See Bulman, "A School for Epic? The 'École William Ponty' and the Evolution of the Sunjata Epic, 1913-c.1960," in *Epic Adventures: Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*, ed. Jan Jansen and Henk M. J. Maier (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 34-45. See also Wole Soyinka, "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns," in *Modern African Drama: Backgrounds and Criticism*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 421-433.

13. Keita was a storyteller, essayist, playwright, and musician who by 1955 was, according to Lansiné Kaba, "acclaimed as the most popular writer and artist in the whole of French-speaking West Africa." Some of Keita's early audio recordings with Les Ballets Africains were banned in France for implicitly criticizing colonialism, but excerpts ("lacking explicit political references") from his collection of songs and stories, *Aube africaine* (1951), "were adopted in the [French] school curriculum as part of the Africanisation programme." See Kaba, "The Cultural Revolution, Artistic Creativity, and Freedom of Expression in Guinea," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1976): 203. For Keita's own articulations of his troupe's cultural mission see "African Dance and the Stage," *World Theater* 7, no. 3 (1958): 164-78.

14. At that point the troupe's title changed to Les Ballets Africains de la République de Guinée. Touré is generally credited with founding Guinea's national arts system even though its inspiration and organization came largely from Keita, whose overwhelming popularity in Guinea—despite his increasing tyrannical acts aimed at proving loyalty—eventually threatened the paranoiac president, leading to his arrest in 1969, and execution without trial in 1971. See Kaba, "Freedom of Expression in Guinea," 205, 213.

15. In Senegal and Mali these were national ballets founded by Leopold Sédar Senghor and Modibo Keita, respectively. Côte d'Ivoire's best known parallel, the Koteba ensemble, was a troupe directed by a Guinean, Souleman Koly. Ghana, with its widely touring national ensembles and eventual popularity in the West, could be grouped with the countries of francophone West Africa in contributing to Western contact with traditional African performance.

16. Waning government funding has reduced production values as well as the scope and frequency of tours, and has eliminated many national ensembles altogether. For example, Guinea under Sékou Toure established three national ballets: Les Ballets Africains, Le Ballet National Djoliba, and Le Ballet National de l'Armée Populaire. The latter no

longer exists, and Les Ballets Africains now tours in much-reduced capacity, while Djoliba neither tours nor receives significant funding.

17. Frederick John Lamp, ed., *See the Music Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art* (New York: Prestel, 2004).

18. Panel discussion, "'Woman, Fire, Ambition, and Desire: The Performance of the Great Baga D'mba'—an interdisciplinary collaboration," Laura & James J. Ross Gallery of African Art, Yale University Art Gallery, October 22, 2007. In addition to Frederick Lamp, the project's collaborators are David Conrad (history), Marie Yvonne Curtis (ethno-aesthetics), Nicholas Hockin (ethnomusicology), Miriam Phillips (dance ethnology), Benjamin Strange (sound design), and Rebecca Wexler (video). The exhibition will be based on fieldwork conducted in Guinea in winter 2007-08.

19. Frederick Lamp, project and panel discussion announcement posted to H-NET List for African Expressive Culture (H-AFRARTS@H-NET.MSU.EDU), August 30, 2007.

20. I paraphrase these points from Susan Vogel's acceptance speech for the ACASA (Arts Council of the African Studies Association) Leadership Award, 14th Triennial Symposium on African Art, Gainesville, Florida, March 31, 2007.

21. Addressing the problem of engaging diverse audiences in fine art museums, the Museum for African Art's Assistant Curator Lisa Binder said (in a personal interview, January 18, 2008, New York) that her preferred approach is layering information for visitors by providing—in addition to basic object labels—pull-out cards, audio tours, catalogues, docent tours, and youth and adult programming and outreach. In her view, emphasizing objects' contexts in installations often verges on ethnography, which, for her and for many fine art curators, is seen as taboo. At the same time, Binder said gearing installations toward young audiences risks alienating older ones. Exhibition-performance is conceived as a mode of engaging wide audiences without alienating any particular group, and of representing contexts without appearing ethnographic.

22. Andrea Fraser in "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," 212.

23. In a panel on historiography at Princeton University in the early 1990s, Jonathan Crary sketched possibilities for broad-minded art historical approaches: "I'm interested in ways of allowing a reconception and reconfiguration of what an object of inquiry can be within a field whose contents are so predetermined. […] To some extent, obviously what is at stake here is genealogy and its notion of a presuppositionless history. It becomes a question of objects with material historical effectivity but that may not be empirically isolable, objects that can become visible only because of our activities of assemblage. This location and identification of new kinds of often patchwork objects becomes then a way of analyzing and defamiliarizing the presumptions and implied values of a given intellectual domain." Thanks to Jonathan Crary for providing a hard copy of this paper, for which he did not know the exact date of presentation.

24. It could be argued that the current challenges facing the serious critic are in fact quite different from those facing the curator or the art historian. And, in a sense, exhibition-performance might seem to be more of a curatorial endeavor than a critical or academic one. Yet I would contend that it encompasses all three domains: curatorial because exhibitive; academic because grounded in field and archival research; and critical because challenging, through its mode and approach, the strictures of conventional museum practice.

25. For more recent transformations of traditional arts see, for example: Z.S. Strother, *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Federick Lamp,

Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention (New York: Museum for African Art; Munich: Prestel, 1996). Some—but proportionately few—Africanist art historians have investigated connections to politics. Two examples are: John W. Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and Politics in Urban West Africa* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987); and Alexander Ives Bortolot, curator, "Revolutions: A Century of Makonde Masquerade in Mozambique," Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, September 19-December 8, 2007.

26. According to Karin Barber, "The two categories, 'traditional' and 'elite' (or 'modern'/'Westernized') have dominated the study of African cultures. […] The African cultural universe is often represented as being divided into two halves: made up of *egúngún* masquerades on the one hand ('traditional' art), Soyinka's *The Road* on the other ('elite'/'modern'/'Westernized' art); the griot on the one hand, Ouologuem on the other. It is sometimes even assumed that the latter, in each case, 'emerged from' or 'grew out of' the former, in an improbably evolutionary progression, as if the traditional gives birth to, and is automatically superseded by, the modern, Westernized, elite forms. Thus the traditional is frozen into place as an origin or influence, which is co-opted to authenticate the modern by providing it with roots." See Barber, ed., *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 1.

27. An additional category of "diaspora" (African-American/Caribbean) art can be said to fit alongside "traditional" and "modern." While there are "scholars, curators and private collectors interested in more than one area," Moyo Okediji notes that "the triad has become so separated that individuals specialize in one specific category." See Okediji, "Semioptics of Africana Art History," in *African Diaspora and the Disciplines*, ed. T. Olaniyan and J. Sweet, conference proceedings, forthcoming.

28. Sidney Kasfir writes: "In African art studies our most uncritical assumption has been the before/after scenario of colonialism, in which art before colonization, occurring in most places from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, exhibited qualities that made it authentic (in the sense of untainted by Western intervention). Most crucially it was made to be used by the same society that produced it. In this scenario, art produced within a colonial or postcolonial context is relegated to an awkward binary opposition: it is inauthentic because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently, tourists and the new African elite. This view of authenticity, though now questioned by many scholars, is still held firmly by major art museums and the most prominent dealers and collectors." See Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," *African Arts* 25, No. 2 (1992): 41. Although now dated, I believe this statement in Kasfir's well-known essay still holds true in many cases.

29. One of the few books on African staged performance is Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Négritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Castaldi, a dance ethnologist, writes that, "The National Ballet…could be shunned by researchers who do not consider it traditional enough (a stance often taken by dance ethnologists and anthropologists)" (58). Ironically a number of works (although not in art history) investigate the American staged production of "traditional" or traditionally derived African performance. See, for example, Leah Creque-Harris, *The Representation of African Dance on the Concert Stage: From the Early Black Musical to Pearl Primus* (PhD. diss., Emory University, 1991); Marcia E. Heard and Mansa K. Mussa, "African Dance in New York City," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Richard A. Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 47-53, 105-113.

30. Simon Ottenberg, "Where Have We Come From? Where Are We Heading? Forty Years of African Art Studies," *African Arts* 26, no. 1 (1993): 73. Susan Vogel similarly

notes that, "[N]ot wishing to give ammunition to the enemy, [Africanist art historians] have knowingly skimmed over things that would cast African cultures in a negative light." See Vogel, "Whither African Art," 16. Zoë Strother also addressed this issue in her paper "A Terrifying Mimesis," presented at the Columbia University Seminar on the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, October 4, 2007. Strother specifically asked whether Africanist art historians dare examine the practices of sorcery that sometimes attend traditional sculpture.

31. According to modernist curator William Rubin, "Some anthropologists speak as if you could somehow recreate the tribal context, and that would explain everything about these objects. Well, first of all, you can't recreate that context." See Rubin, *Perspectives*, 51. Lamp's logic is lengthier, but cannot be understood without full quotation: "The task here is to accept the challenge of presenting the art form as it was conceived by the African artists and viewed by its African audience. The problem of translation in the museum gallery is paramount. African performance may require the space of the entire village, incorporating the architecture, the plazas, the walkways and streets, as well as the hot sun of mid-day or the dim gray of dusk, hundreds of viewer-participants, the cacophony of competing groups of dancers, polyphonic singers, and multiple-meter drummers, the billowing dust from under stamping feet, and five or six hours of duration. Obviously, all this cannot be brought literally into the museum gallery—and should not, for the risk of exoticizing and trivializing something of deep significance. But it should be acknowledged, suggested, and in some ways represented in museum interpretation." See Lamp, *See the Music Hear the Dance*, 26.

32. Here I do not aim to preemptively critique Lamp's current project, which I believe will make an important contribution to understandings of African (and specifically Baga) masquerade. My intention is to anticipate some limitations which may be inherent to Lamp's chosen format.

33. For an early history of Africanist art history see Adrian A. Gerbrands, "The History of African Art Studies," in *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, 1987), 11-28.

34. Take, for example, the following statement by Olu Oguibe: "Autonomy. Self-articulation. Autography. These are contested territories where the contemporary African artist is locked in a struggle for survival, a struggle against displacement by the numerous strategies of regulation and surveillance that characterize Western attitudes toward African art today. Within the scheme of their relationship with the West, it is forbidden that African artists should possess the power of self-definition, the right to *author*-ity. It is forbidden that they should enounce outside the gaze and free of the interventionist powers of others." See Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13. Indeed, individual names largely remain absent from Western collections, while contemporary African artists continue to face critical reticence and ignorance, and are often made, as Anthony Downey puts it, "to wear… their identities on their sleeve in a way that would be both reductive and condescending if applied to a Western artist." See Downey, "Critical Imperatives: Notes on Contemporary Art Criticism and African Cultural Production," *Wasafiri* 21, no. 1 (2006): 45. For a critical discussion of Western researchers' interviews with African artists see Z. S. Strother, "African Works: Anxious Encounters in the Visual Arts," *RES* 39 (Spring 2001): 5-23.

35. As Boris Groys points out, many exhibitions are collaborations between multiple authors. I am proposing to acknowledge the collaborative nature of museum work and to provide artists a larger forum for expression and discourse. See Groys, "Multiple Authorship," in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Vanderlinden and Filipovic, 93-100.

36. One explanation for why objects and ballet artists do not currently interact in the West may be that masks were stigmatized under President Sékou Touré's cultural policy, which was influenced both by

socialism and Islam. The most severe crackdown on ritual art came in the 1961-63 Demystification campaign, addressed comprehensively by Michael McGovern in "Unmasking the State: Developing Modern Political Subjectivities in 20th-Century Guinea" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2004). Nevertheless, masks appear consistently in ballet productions, as I discussed in "The Baga Female Headdress, Ethnic Interweaving, and Nation-as-Narrative in Les Ballets Africains *Sacred Forest*," presented at "CO- Collaboration and Collectivity in Art," UCLA Art History Graduate Student Symposium, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, October 26, 2007.

37. In addition to six years with Guinea's National Percussion Ensemble (Les Percussions de Guinée, 1989-1995), Camara's career has included work with Fatala, Ballet Merveilles, Bembaya Jazz, Wofa, and the Koteba ensemble.

38. Denver Art Museum, April 14, 2007, also with musicians Fara Tolno and Facinet Bangoura.

Response

In a thorough and provocative analysis of the display of traditional African art in the West, Cohen focuses on the many "obsolescences" surrounding Guinean masks. Central to this discussion is the decontextualizing force of the museum; whether an institution of the anthropological or "white cube" variety, the properties of an object are altered when removed from touch and sound, separated within the vacuum of the vitrine. In the aesthetic distancing from "real life," all traces of the object's previous movement, in story and dance, tend to be obscured. In this way, the cultural complexity of the object is denied and the visual is privileged as its central impetus. In a larger sense, the museum, through its various conventions, suggests that the previous function of the object is now obsolete, or worse, that its makers might be.

It is interesting and even surprising that Cohen's proposal includes the continued use of the white cube gallery. I believe that the use of the format serves to juxtapose traditions of knowledge in a complex and insightful manner. Clearly the combination of exhibition-performance brings together elements of both European and Guinean conventions of display. Following their viewing in the gallery space, the dancing of the masks can underscore the different intentions and meanings that are made through presentation.

Regarding the use of the museum as a space of cultural production, some may question the idea of performance within the museum setting, as it recalls some of the egregious institutional displays of not-so-distant pasts. The proposition of exhibition-performance puts the curator in a precarious position, straddled between the roles of what Mari Carmen-Ramirez has termed "artistic arbiters" and "cultural brokers."[1] Ramirez warns against the framing and performance of collective identities as inherently reductive enterprises. Culturally performative elements must be approached with caution and structured in a manner that emphasizes dialogue and mutual exchange. White cubes, while never ideal, might at least become more self-reflexive by incorporating these exchanges.

To Cohen's proposal, I would add only one suggestion. The issue of conservation is one that needs to be

addressed in detail if this model is to be implemented on a wider scale. The handling and use of fine art objects defies most of their trustees mandates. The objects of our living world are subject to damage and decay. The duplication of these objects might be one way in which to trouble notions of authenticity, singularity, and authorship within the museum context. Could the masks be replicated in order to be danced, or could replicas be displayed while the originals are danced? Perhaps what is most necessary for such endeavours to be actualized is a complete shift in understanding surrounding museum and fine art conservation, where the use of an object might heighten rather than diminish its value.

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Notes:

1. Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation," *Thinking About Exhibitions*, Greenberg, Ferguson and Nairne, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 21.