



FANG: AN EPIC JOURNEY

A film by Susan M. Vogel

This is a work of fiction—but everything in it is based on real events. FANG mixes documentary and fiction techniques to recount the perils and adventures of an African figure, and uses the film styles of each period to tell its story—a whole century of European attitudes packed into 8 minutes.

"FANG is fast, funny and provocative. The film focuses attention on the arbitrary and changing nature of the categories of "art" in Western culture and raises important questions about the integrity of the object and the relationship between museum exhibition of objects and their value on the art market. It takes me two lectures to cover this material; this film does it in 8 minutes."

Professor Jean Borgatti,
Clark University, Worcester

"In a thoroughly inventive approach to its topic, this crisp black and white drama explores the ways in which African art has been appropriated through time and space."

Margaret Mead Festival,
American Museum of Natural History

Accompanied by an illustrated booklet featuring a round table discussion by: Rowland Abiodun (Professor, Amherst); Jean Fritts (Expert, Sotheby's); Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (Professor, New York University); Alisa LaGamma (Curator, Metropolitan Museum); Eric Robertson (Art Dealer, New York); Enid Schildkrout (Curator, American Museum of Natural History).

8 minutes; B&W and Color; VHS, NTSC / PAL

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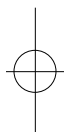
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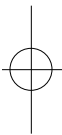
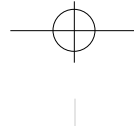
Design: Barbara Grzeslo

IDOL BECOMES ART!

**EDITED BY
SUSAN M. VOGEL**

**NOTES AND A
ROUNDTABLE
DISCUSSION**



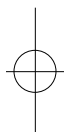
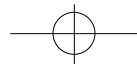


A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The issues raised in my film, *FANG: An Epic Journey*, are sufficiently complex to warrant framing by specialists. To that end, I invited a group of colleagues with different backgrounds to discuss the questions *FANG* raised (or failed to raise) for use as an introduction for a wider public. I introduced the question “Who owns African art?” Of course, the debate is inconclusive because that issue and most of the others raised here can never be definitively resolved. The answers attach to beliefs more often than to facts.

It is my hope that this discussion, and the film it accompanies, will help individuals reexamine and clarify their own convictions. More deeply, this project may help the reader uncover and perhaps reach a new understanding of the reasoning—through political, intellectual, autobiographical and other layers of belief—that led to the positions he or she already holds.

Susan Vogel



THE HISTORY BEHIND THE FILM

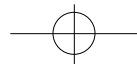
This life history of an art object is a work of fiction, but everything in it is based on real events.

No single object followed this entire path, but many different African objects followed parts of it. Most of the human characters in the film are based on actual people, and our hero is a polymer resin cast of an authentic Fang figure in a private collection.

Two identical, hollow, pale gray casts were painstakingly made for filming by the master mold maker of the Metropolitan Museum, then painted their respective colors. The original sculpture today is brownish black and lacks both its back post and phallus. In both areas traces of cutting are evident. The darkened cast is identical to the original, but in making the other version we had to surmise the form of the missing parts based on similar figures (see *Fang*, 1991, p. 54-55). Because scenes in the film were not shot in the order of the story, the black version had to be repeatedly cut apart and glued together.

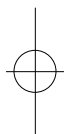


The rubber trader in the first scene is based on Gunther Tessmann (1884-1969), a German ethnologist, explorer, collector and author who traveled in Cameroon and Gabon between 1904 and 1917, collecting many Fang objects for the muse-



um in Lubeck. Tessmann is the author of many articles and the definitive work, *Die Pangwe*, (1913). An interesting short biography by Philippe Laburthe-Tolra addresses his work and his somewhat tortured personality. He was one of many Europeans, marginalized at home—in his case as a homosexual—who preferred life in Africa away from his countrymen.

The second scene evokes a store for rubber automobile accessories where the teenage Paul Guillaume worked as a clerk in 1911. There he first encountered African art and met some of the leading buyers and sellers of the day. At the time, African objects brought back by sailors or traders were sold inexpensively in curio shops, cafes, and flea markets.



Georges Braque's studio, photographed in 1911, formed the basis for the artist's studio set in the next scene. Beginning in 1906-07, avant garde artists in Paris began to collect African objects and to integrate some of the formal ideas into their work. They generally had fanciful ideas about these objects, having almost no knowledge of—and little interest in—the African

artists who had made them or the ideas the objects expressed.

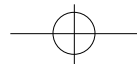


By 1914 Paul Guillaume had become an art dealer of the most advanced contemporary art, and African art. He was one of the earliest and to this day one of the most influential dealers in the African field. Objects that can be shown to have passed through his hands have added value today. He was the main

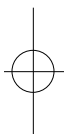
formative influence on Alfred Barnes, persuading him to acquire important African and modern artworks now the Barnes Foundation Museum, near Philadelphia. An eloquent advocate, Guillaume also co-authored a book on African art and helped convince the art world that African objects were truly art. There is no evidence that he personally altered works of art in the way shown in the film, though objects were routinely "cleaned," mounted on bases, and labeled by dealers and collectors who felt no compunction about "improving" them.

The "Revue Negre" poster from 1926 shows the American performer Josephine Baker—who helped fueled the rage for Black culture in Paris of the twenties. It is by the graphic artist Paul Colin.

The "abstract" gallery display in this scene replicates the 1914 installation in New York which was the first exhibition anywhere of African art "shown solely from the point of view of art." It was organized by Marius de Zayas, designed by Edward Steichen, and held at



"291," the gallery on Fifth Avenue established by Alfred Steiglitz and the Photo-Secession group. Paul Guillaume, whose own gallery opened in Paris the same year, lent objects to that exhibition. Installation design for African art has remained remarkably close to this model for nearly a century.



Our German professor is based upon Julius Lips who was professor and Director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest ethnographic museum in Cologne when Hitler

came to power. According to Nazi doctrine, African art was "degenerate" along with modern and Jewish art. Though Lips was not Jewish, his research and collection of photographs of artworks by Africans and other "lower races" depicting Europeans was considered "an insult to Hitler" and "a crime against the race." He was hounded from his post and fled to New York in 1934 where he joined the faculty of Columbia University. His book, *The*

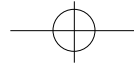
Savage Hits Back or the White Man Through Native Eyes opens with a moving account of these events, followed by sometimes hilarious sculptures portraying exotic white people.

African sculptures were sometimes cut to enhance their resemblance to high art: the back post might be removed from a Fang figure; a staff surmounted by a figure might be transformed into a figure on a base. Large objects were also cut to facilitate transportation. This is the only event in the film not based on a known case.



I doubt that Man Ray, the American Dadaist artist, ever met Julius Lips, but he did photograph African objects and he visited Hamburg in 1933. His portrait of Nancy Cunard, and the photograph "Noir et Blanche" seen in the film were both taken in 1926.

The New York book party in the next scene is an imagined event hosted by Nancy Cunard who was an ardent supporter of Black causes and edited the massive anthology *Negro* (1934) which she also published. She was friendly with many members of the European avant-garde and was photographed by Man Ray wearing an armful of African ivory bracelets. (Her speech is abstracted from her writing). For her living room we took the liberty of shooting in the beautiful room in New York



designed by the architect Alvar Aalto in the early 1960s with his poetic abstract of a Finnish forest.

Making a speech in this scene is the educator, writer and philosopher Alain Locke (1886-1954) whose book, *The Negro in Art: a Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*, was published in 1940. Locke was the first African-American Rhodes scholar in 1907 (and the only one until the 1960s!). Locke, who was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, first encountered African art in Germany in 1910-11 and became an early collector and writer on African art and its relationship to African-American art. He taught at Howard University most of his life and left his collection to the University Museum when he died. For the purposes of the film, in the opening and final scenes, he is shown alive and still writing in the recent past.

The closing scene was shot in the Brooklyn Museum where their extraordinary Mvai (Gabon) Fang figure can be seen. In real life, however, the Fang figure from which the cast was made is going to join the collection of the Yale Art Gallery.

SMV

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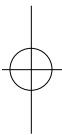
"Les fragments du ciel aux cultes du mal; Considerations à propos de *Die Pangwe de G. Tessmann*" in *Fang*, 1991, p. 11-79.

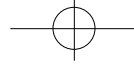
Ph. Laburthe-Tolra and Ch. Falgayrettes-Leveau

Fang, Paris, 1991

Tessmann, Gunther

Die Pangwe, Berlin, 1913.





IDOL BECOMES ART!

A Conversation

Produced and edited by Susan Vogel

Round table discussion held in New York, 2000.

PARTICIPANTS:

**ROWLAND ABIODUN, PROFESSOR
AMHERST COLLEGE**

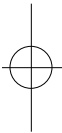
**JEAN FRITTS, SPECIALIST
SOTHEBY'S**

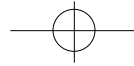
**BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT
PROFESSOR, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY**

**ALISA LAGAMMA, CURATOR
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

**ERIC ROBERTSON
ART DEALER**

**ENID SCHILDKROUT, CURATOR
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**





BKG: The film showed a scientist, an anguished artist in a vexed relationship, a couple concerned with fertility, intellectuals, the object as a curio, as a lamp—it covers lot of bases. The art market is a big category, and we see lots of transitions here, but I don't know what to make of it.

AL: One thing that is lacking here is the complete history—the original Fang context in which it served. The film doesn't take into account the original source of inspiration for carving the sculpture, the world of ideas and beliefs that were part of its reason for being.

ES: The film is not about Africa and doesn't try to be. Nothing in it shows the original source. The problem is for people who are concerned with Africa and want to know about Africa, not just to validate the piece, but because they care about that. How do you reconcile concerns with the source with the life history of the piece in the Western art world, which is what the film is actually about.

JF: It shows how little is known. Thousands and thousands of pieces came out of Africa with no information. Some were made for sale to Europeans—there is not much detailed information about the early period, who traded and why. But there certainly was a demand in Europe.

AL: I have always thought that the reason so many Cameroon and Gabon reliquaries in Western collections were detached from [the boxes of ancestral remains]—even in early ethnographic museum collections—is that

the really precious element of the unit was preserved *in situ* by the Fang owners, and the more replaceable element was traded. So the Western collector, who is interested only in the artifact, is satisfied, and the indigenous patrons, who know [the figure] is not of the highest value or priority, are satisfied too.

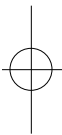
ES: But in a way they weren't. There was at that time a real market for human remains.

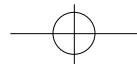
AL: I think you would see more of these boxes and crania in museums if they had been transferred in huge quantities. These items, isolated from the reliquary containers, were being traded as part of larger trading networks—this is part of the record.

ES: Not in the Native American [trade] where there was a higher market in human remains at that time than there was for this material as art. We can see how they get separated, and one becomes art while the other becomes ethnography. But there was a real lust for collecting skulls at that time.

AL: In Fang culture the sacred component was the container with the relics. The figure that surmounted it was a guardian figure but it was not of the sacred order of the human relics. The Fang were not naïve in these transactions; they guarded what they could not duplicate. The [sculpture] could be duplicated. In the trade they were not removed together.

ER: We see the transformation of the object in the film—often the African owners took items off, or dealers in





Africa, took off what was not palatable—encrustations—to make the piece more valuable on the market. We know the original owners safeguarded precious objects—the carving is easily replaced but metal and other attachments weren't and they were taken off when the wood was sold.

Pieces were transformed by everybody all the way down the line. The market caters to Western tastes and needs. Each object has an incredible story behind it—the transformation and the connections people made between the original sacred grove and the object in a collection.

AL: The choice of a Fang object is interesting because these are one of the genres most valorized in the art world. These were among the earliest pieces to come out, collected by the French avant-garde. They were mesmerized by the way the human form was abstracted—by the very dynamic abstract solutions to the human form. The history of how the Western avant-garde collected these has become part of our own art history.

The way we value these Fang objects more than Nigerian ones—Yoruba art for example—isn't capricious. There is a premium placed on rarity in the art market, and there are fewer of these Fang sculptures than Yoruba ones. Fang [figures] stopped being created in the 1930s and 40s. We have a limited corpus, and that contributes to their value in the art market.

BKG: We're getting back to giving priority to the source as opposed to recognizing that these objects have lives that extend well beyond the source—and that their life

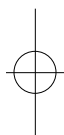
[in the West] may be much longer than the time they existed before they were collected.

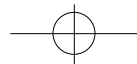
What—or who—makes an object a work of art? What gives it value?

RA: There are problems here. How the idol becomes art—who is responsible for the appellation “art?” who are these authorities? It goes farther. It seems as if by some unspoken agreement in the market there has not only been a mis-representation of this object, a mis-use of this object; a commoditization, but a total elimination of how the makers or users thought of it. This is a very big problem.

BKG: I know this is an unpopular idea, but de-contextualizing makes it possible to receive these objects as art in Western contexts. De-contextualizing is very powerful. If one says that what is important about these objects is their source, where they come from, what they were made for, what they meant in their original context, and one believes that without communicating this we do violence to the object, then, unfortunately in a Western situation, they are relegated to ethnography. Because we don't take that position for other objects, and when we do, we treat them as ethnographic.

What's happening, rather, is that by collecting and displaying these objects in [art] collections and museums we are paying them the highest mark of respect that our society can pay them. And we are acknowledging that they have a history, and that they played an important role in the history of Western art and modern art in addi-





tion to their history in their source culture. There are two histories here, at least, maybe more.

JF: What you can say is that Art museums that previously did not show this art—for whatever reason—have now decided to, and the impact is enormous. People who may not have known that there is any kind of sculpture from Africa can actually walk into these institutions and see it—I think there is a value to that, even if it is not a perfect kind of educational communication.

RA: Sieber said “Admiration in isolation leads to misunderstanding.” African art has fallen prey to tastes of the twentieth century and is vaguely misunderstood. We may not be aware of it, but we are gradually trying to remove Africa from African art, and when that happens what will we be left with? our opinions. In addition, what we say is influencing what is happening on the African continent. Aesthetic norms are being dictated from outside of Africa

JF: That’s been going on for a long time.

AL: Lots of objects in Western collections have been de-contextualized—paintings, altar pieces. That is a fact. Objects not from Africa—altars—are displayed as fragments. Do we want to see African art discriminated against? Not to be appreciated as part of this larger aesthetic enjoyment?

BKG: Objects in Western museum collections have been removed from contexts—church objects, crucifixes and so forth. There are many parallels. But how are these

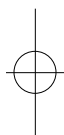
African objects removed from the source? Is it always through violence? Or was it sometimes voluntary?

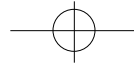
RA: What I have in mind is the forcible removal of objects from Benin, Ashanti, and the Belgian Congo. In all these places, not only were objects removed, there were extensive massacres of the very people whose artworks were revered in Europe at high prices. There will never be a snowball’s chance in hell that these people will ever be paid back for any of this.

AL: But these Fang pieces we’re talking about were not removed through pillage. Trade was happening in this region of Equatorial Africa over a hundred years. I worry about lumping all these transfers together—it helps to be more nuanced and to look at things region by region.

Can a work of art have different—even contradictory—meanings that are nonetheless all legitimate?

JF: Maybe these objects can be appreciated on many levels. You have the level on which the piece was made, the original intent—but the fact is these objects are all over the world, and people appreciate them deeply in different ways and on different levels. Some are in museums with a little label with the tribal name and a possible date and no information. Other museums show them in a tribal context or as part of a bigger phenomenon. It can be both good and bad—the positive side is that you can appreciate art from other cultures whether you have cultural knowledge or not. A lot of context was never collected, so we will never know.





ER: African art has always been misunderstood. In the market, most people enjoy art—they relate to it in their own terms, and they pay money for it. They don't really keep in mind what it is used for. It's art. Picasso and Van Gogh's work is not connected to their biographies. People just know it is a terrific piece and it gives them what they need—it could be just status, a collecting role with their friends. Whatever.

BKG: If you take as your standard how this object was originally used and understood and shown and loved and aestheticized and [you] say that anything that departs from that takes us down this slippery slope to damaging, basically to doing violence to the object—then you're suggesting that to decontextualize these objects is in a sense to silence and make invisible the people.

RA: I believe that art should not be admired in isolation because that causes a lot of misunderstanding—not just condescension. It is just creating an African art out of our own imagination, not the one that comes from Africa.

BKG: What I'm hearing is that, in the exhibiting of African art objects, the primary responsibility is to the understandings of those who made and used them, and that anything that runs counter—or doesn't take full account of that—is doing damage. And I'm wondering if curators and scholars and museum professionals and collectors and dealers would hold to that restriction.

RA: It is just a matter of fairness in the end—and of fair

representation, to make sure that we do the minimal distortion or damage. This is a work in progress—something that we have to work on, museums, collectors, art historians, art dealers, the market, everybody—we have to have this constant conversation—even about the best way the works are exhibited in museum halls.

ER: We have a new negative Africa—not Tarzan Africa, but Africa of horrible diseases, atrocities, wars. I would love to see the creativity of the African peoples joined to the arts that are being portrayed.

BKG: So if I understand you, you're saying there is a conflict between aesthetics and education. That is to say, that to exhibit these objects the way one would exhibit art—any art—is to compromise the educational opportunity that these objects offer in a situation of extreme duress.

ES: And you are saying that you want people to think about Africa in a way that has some relationship to what Africa is today, not just Africa in the west.

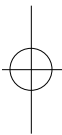
BKG: So maybe what we need is ethnographic exhibitions, not art exhibitions.

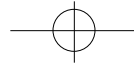
RA: No

ER: No

ES: Why not?

ER: She's from the Museum of Natural History!





JF: But museums and collectors have put this art up on the level of art from every other culture and I think that is incredibly important. You know the battle that went on over putting African art in the Louvre—there it is on the same level as art from every culture. The same is true at the Metropolitan.

RA: I would like to make a small remark on that—when you say putting the art on the same level as that of other cultures—is this universal aesthetic a euphemism for Western aesthetic?

JF: It's an approach. Museums are Western.

Is "African art" an artifact of Western culture now, divorced from Africa?

RA: The red flag went up as soon as I saw the Fang. My first question was why the Fang? Alisa, you answered it very well: because of what was going on at the time. And the second was—look at what they are doing to that object! What do we have left of that object? Do we still have a Fang reliquary figure? That is a major question. Then what does the art market do to this situation?

ER: The art market is romancing it, and making the object its own, so that it can fulfill the desire of the collector. Period! It always has. It's not complicated. I think it is somewhat amusing in the film where the object is sitting in this very serious sober shrine that has nothing to do with the clean elegant gallery or somebody's nice pristine Madison Avenue home.

It goes through all these changes and yet it's still considered authentic because it was sitting in a shrine, though in the end of the film it is only half an object—the lower half is part of a lamp. It has all kinds of associations that have nothing to do with the object itself and the people who originally made it—who might at that time have been regarded as somewhat less than human.

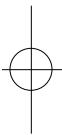
ES: That shows how simplistic the notion of authenticity is. Once a piece enters the market it is modified continually for all its different audiences.

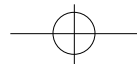
JF: There wouldn't be any market and these pieces wouldn't be in collections if there weren't a desire. Whatever fantasy the collector may be working out, or whatever ideas the museum may have about why you should chose this piece rather than that piece, or why you should even have African art at all—unless you had a desire, they wouldn't be there.

RA: I agree. The demand is for certain kinds of work. Whose aesthetic is driving the market? Who is defining what African art is? And is the economic situation in Africa playing a role?

JF: The role of individual players is very significant. The market for the Fang was created in relation to modernism but also because there were individual players at the time who were creating a market—who sent people to Africa saying "go get these things."

RA: With the phallus removed.





What's wrong with physically changing a work of art? Could preserving one be wrong?

RA: There are parts of Africa, for example the Igbo [ethnic group in Nigeria], where art was defined by [Herbert] Cole as a verb. Art is not a noun; it is something to be used, something that is active, something to wear away. It's made, and it's supposed to disintegrate. It's processural: the very process of disintegration itself is integral to art. Very much like a human body, it's supposed to disintegrate—in Africa we allow nature to take its toll.

BKG: Your point is interesting because we assume that a unique object is being created, and that somehow if left to its own devices it would have been preserved in its original locale. But as Alisa suggested, the reliquary figure might well have been replaced—and therefore the work is bigger than the figure. What we have here as the figure is really only one material phase of an object which, over time, would have been replaced anyway. So it is like a snapshot—only one phase in the multiple manifestations of the thing.

ES: As early as the turn of the last century, many objects were made for sale. Because Westerners have seen use as a mark of validity of an object, a lot of signs of use were manipulated for the market—as we've seen in the film. This isn't rare. Sometimes these are overlooked as long as someone can claim the piece was collected in 1902—and they can assume it must have come from a context of use. But we have good evidence that even at that period, there were substitute pieces and objects

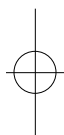
made for sale. Once pieces have that 100-year history, it's not evident any more which pieces are good.

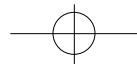
JF: There is a bias in the marketplace towards objects that appear to have been used—a feeling that something was actually used in a ritual or ceremony makes it more valuable financially. But as we saw in this film, there is so much transformation—who knows?.

Who has benefited from the commodification of African objects? Have you?

ER: Something that is often overlooked: Africans themselves were active dealers and participants in these economic exchanges. From the time the first Europeans set foot in Africa, there has always been this kind of exchange—the Afro-Portuguese ivories were [traded in the sixteenth century]. Remember that at the beginning of an object, there was a sale. It was paid for, commissioned. Some pieces were stolen, looted, taken forcibly in war—but given the entrepreneurial spirit of Africa, the normal way a piece would leave is by exchange for goods.

RA: I have no problem with the Afro-Portuguese trade or other works that were part of legitimate intercultural exchanges. Here it goes beyond the physical mutilation we saw—sawing off and maiming those works, making it totally impossible to reconstruct those works. People have the same response to these works—they don't need information or training. It's just love at first sight. With this kind of excuse, we have a free-for-all field with no chance of discerning anything like the aesthetics that actually informed their creators.





ER: I don't differ with Rowland, especially his last comments. He is concerned that the art not be separated from the people—not only as a political thing but also as a social fact. Coming from the African diaspora, from Jamaica, and growing up in the US, I also share this concern. One sees objects that are world treasures, on a level with any other kind of art—but the people who created them are put in another category, they are forgotten.

This has been a trend all along. When Frobenius discovered Ife bronzes and terracottas [in 1913], for example, people said they must be from some other continent [Atlantis]. He himself was confused that black hands, African hands could have created such great masterpieces. European artists, who thought that this primitive art was so wonderful, something they could use for their own reasons completely disregarded the context from which it was taken.

We have a situation in Africa where the continent is continually misunderstood because of temporary states of exceptional chaos, suffering, and lack of security that overshadow and distort the fact that you are dealing with a people who have been extremely creative. African people made world class masterpieces and these masterpieces are being separated in the public eye from the people who actually exist.

JF: The reason there is this big divide is that art presented as great masterpieces was made way in the past. What is the continuum in Africa—or even in our appreciation of African art—between now and work that may have been collected in 1906? Maybe what we really

should be showing and talking about is work made in Africa right now.

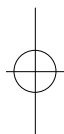
ER: We do have contemporary artists who are being neglected who are extraordinarily creative. The fact is, though, that dealers—Gogosian and others—are selling some of these artists on the international level; the Smithsonian, the Museum for African Art, and the American Museum of Natural History are showing them. Contemporary artists have a lot to say about their situation.

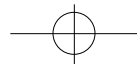
ES: They're more difficult for the Western world to deal with because they don't put Africa in its place. They don't conform to the way a lot of people think about Africa—they raise questions about what Africa is today. I think the classic 100 year old works allow people to go on with certain views about Africa that subdue it, categorize it in a certain way and are very unthreatening.

Who does African art belong to?

ER: Many people say they are temporary custodians—or it belongs to who purchased it; it belongs in places that are secure. Many African museums and institutions are made not secure because of politics and funding problems—so it becomes an intellectual exercise as far as who it belongs to, even if it is archaeological.

RA: The concept of the museum, the concept of art dealing, the concept of collecting, the concept of preservation of art for eternity—these things are there, you know, but there are moral questions we have to answer.





BKG: I see two different issues: who does African art belong to as a large category, and as individual pieces—and they are not the same question. Part of what we're getting at is that if you let objects belong only to people who made and used them, nothing could ever move. Are there transactions that you would consider legitimate ways for objects that originate in Africa to move?

ES: Trade existed in the nineteenth century within Africa between leaders—art was moved, traded, bought, exchanged, used as gifts in diplomacy. Sometimes art was exchanged because it had power. Objects moved from one group to another so that carvers were not necessarily part of an isolated culture that had exclusive ownership—however you define ownership. What is "ownership" is as difficult as "what is art?"

Can a nation benefit by giving up important objects from its cultural patrimony?

RA: In Nigeria, why should we go to the museum? In Ife, there is a festival every day of the year. You can see all these things being paraded, students can actively participate, they can see things in shrines. The idea of arresting the object in a museum was not the most popular one. The history of museums itself is not the finest—the places where the conquered displayed the booty of the conquered. Even though they have become a very lofty thing now, we cannot easily brush off that history.

AL: Would you rather there be no important works of African art represented in art museums the way we have

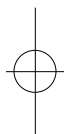
art from Asia, from other parts of the world? Do you find it problematic that Africa is represented honorably in other company?

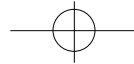
RA: No, that's not the issue. A lot of things are changing—would I rather fly from Nigeria than walk or come on horseback? Of course I like to fly. Once it has started, once everybody is in the game, you would be the loser if you didn't join in. However, if we are all participating in this game of collecting and everything, there must be fairness at every level.

ES: Standards of collecting change—we wouldn't go out and collect the way that was seen as OK in the last century. But that doesn't mean that you dismiss all collecting of African art over time, because a lot of it was very legitimately traded. So standards change. In China you go to painted caves, and you see big pieces of walls hacked out by Western collectors. You see other paintings where the eyes have been destroyed by later [Chinese] people who didn't have the same religion.

ER: I'd like to add another thing about who owns African art because it is often neglected: the fact that in Africa collectors do exist. This has been true for about 20 years. They are quite active but again at a disadvantage because of the security situation, or the situation in Nigeria where you have signs saying to buy or sell an antiquity is a crime—yet they do exist.

They're buying and have a great pride in what they own—whether it's authentic or inauthentic—again those terms are fraught with controversy. If you ask them who





owns African art they say, 'we do because this is our heritage, this is something that we find to be satisfying'— for whatever reasons. And we cannot question them—there are many reasons why people collect. They should play a role in our understanding of what's really going on but their voices have not been taken into account.

ES: Also in Africa today, in a lot of cases, objects are not used in the same way [as they are here], and African people on the whole do not think of these things as art or use them for decoration or as aesthetic objects. So they have a completely different life here from what they would have in Africa today.

RA: The situation is complicated by the fact that the economic stress in Africa might not permit them to have the luxury of collecting and keeping—even maintaining objects in museums—as we do here. Think of the case of those people whose plane crashed in the Andes and the only way to survive was cannibalism. This is not something people want to do, but the situation caused them to do it. This may look like a wild analogy but it's not. If you have to choose between sending your children to medical school or getting your house repaired...

ER: ... or getting medicine...

RA: ...getting medicine, and you have your shrine there with objects, and people say—hey I'll give you \$500 just get everything out—you will do it.

AL: Yes—but I think we tend not to give enough credit to

the resilience of cultures that are still active in a lot of contexts. It's always dangerous when you're making generalizations, but I did my research relatively recently in [the Ogowe River area] Gabon where the iconic sculptural form that I was focused on was no longer invariably used in a performative context.

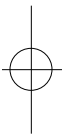
Now local families were commissioning artifacts and hanging them on the wall—very much a reaction to generations of witnessing the way artifacts are treated in the West. It oversimplifies to say everything has been taken out of its place of origin and there is nothing to fill that gap. A reaction occurs—a development of new ways of experiencing art, some retentions, new traditions...

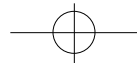
RA: You're perfectly right. I'm still corresponding with traditional artists and they are creating works for festivals. But there is still this economic pressure on people to force them to give up these things—all over Africa. Find out how much people earn per year.

AL: That's the same kind of pressure that affects peasants in Italy who are digging up their backyards.

ER: About the question of who owns African art, you remind me of something new, that I haven't seen before. In Nigeria, kingdoms and traditional governments that are still quite powerful have asserted themselves in actually marketing and playing a role in which objects leave the area.

I'm referring to archaeological objects. They think because these objects have value in the West, and





because they come from the ground, they can play a role—not in keeping the objects there—but a role in marketing the objects. And they're issuing documents to that effect. I was quite surprised to see that. The momentum all over Africa is for democratic government and freedom in economic activities, and this applies to the so-called art market. There is so little trust in the central government, and we're talking about—at least as far as they are concerned—sizable amounts of money.

This came about as various Nigerian chiefs were sending their sons to Thailand to market the semi-precious stones they found in the area—then the archaeological objects which are found in the process of digging the stones are also marketed under their control.

They say they do not trust the central government, which may say these archaeological objects should stay in the country. They say government does not provide us with adequate roads, hospitals, etc., so we are looking to provide for ourselves. This is something I just recently saw—I didn't know it existed, but because of the movement of moneys coming into these areas they have decided to do this. Even collecting wooden objects in these areas, you actually have to clear it with the chief.

BKG: The question I am hearing is: who has the power to determine where and when and how an object will move? And Rowland's objection is to an inequality of power, so that those who make the objects are forced to relinquish them, perhaps under adverse conditions, against their will—with violence, by force of circumstance.

But that is still a different issue from what I would call the inalienability of objects. That is, objects that should never for whatever reasons be in the market. That no one should ever be compelled relinquish—that are just outside the realm. Every society has a sense of such objects whether they be human remains, or cult objects.

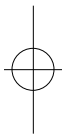
If an illegally exported object were returned to Africa, who should it go to? Could they sell it? Alter it?

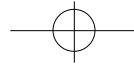
ES: You also have to look at ownership over time and space. In Africa or in the West? —that's too broad a brush, because within Africa, are you talking about a family? a clan? a local chief? a country? The countries today may not be the countries that existed at the time the pieces were collected, or may not be the same ones that claim ownership in the future.

ER: If you go to the typical African village, where they've decided to sell objects—we're not even talking about human remains but African objects—quite small, less than 12 inches. Some objects they're not going to sell because they still believe in these objects, they're still animists—and some objects they will sell. But if you tell the chief, I'm sorry, you can't do that...

BKG: You shouldn't do it, it's not good for you...

ER: First, they want to know your motives. They do not trust anybody who says they are coming with a high motive. And they do not trust—for good reason—the motivation of central authorities because (especially in





the West African context), there are always competing economic concerns as to where the money is going. They are very familiar with what happens at the central level where the pieces are supposed to be guarded for “patrimony.”

This is a fact we don’t like to talk about—but it’s a problem which exists. For example, I have helped at least three small governments in Africa look at their collections over the last 20 years and those pieces are no longer there—because as soon as the value was known, the pieces left. It’s just a fact of life. We don’t blame the people who work in these institutions because we know the severe problems that they are under. Malaria is rampant, a very virulent form, people talk a lot about AIDS, and for an African wage earner to die is a catastrophe for the family.

To approach a village or family and to say I’m sorry you can’t sell this object—would be completely out of context. They can’t understand what you’re talking about because you’re talking from the luxury of the West where we have choices. They don’t have those choices. That object may be the only thing they have that is of value.

BKG: So what you’re saying is that you can’t win. You buy them—it’s no good; you don’t buy them—it’s no good.

ER: Say it again—who can’t win?

BKG: Those who buy these objects. If a New York dealer

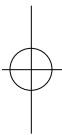
goes and buys them, then this is taking things that shouldn’t be moved and...

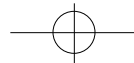
ER: In the trade situation, it’s a win win thing we have going here, because money passes hands. In this larger perspective from abroad, we could say yes—they’re losing this so-called patrimony, they’re losing this important thing that sustains the country. But even in the so-called advanced countries—Nigeria, Zimbabwe—people, even up to the level of professors, have trouble earning what they need. If they have control over objects, and they do not take care of their families, their families will denounce them. They’ll say—you are selfish—you have control over these objects, we are suffering, and there is somebody here who wants to trade.

RA: The decision to sell is not always one that a chief would like to take under normal circumstances, but it takes place anyway. You have to make a choice between living—and not living.

BKG: There is something fundamentally immoral about valuating objects and allowing people to die.

ER: I think the market is always going to exist.





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