The Distance from ‘Primitivism’

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The museum exhibit, ‘A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Faletti Collection’, recently closed at the Museum for African Art in New York. The exhibit, co-curated by Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen Roberts, originally began at the Phoenix Art Museum and will continue to travel to other cities in the United States before concluding in May 2000. The New York exhibit received enthusiastic reviews which found the objects ‘ravishing’ and praised the Roberts as ‘imaginative thinkers and scholars’ for their work on the exhibition catalogue.¹ The objects on display are indeed exquisite pieces, at times breathtakingly so; however, I find it disturbing that the exhibit and catalogue are able to fashion themselves (and hence, read) as innovative, or even politically progressive. It is perhaps the ‘beauty’ of these objects which first leads to confusion.

I had previously seen ‘A Sense of Wonder’ at the Smart Museum in Chicago, and before entering that exhibit, I had glanced briefly at the catalogue co-written by the Roberts. The catalogue uses the dual categories of the fantastic and the sublime to represent the objects — denoting, respectively, the façade and inner spirit of the sculpture. Seemingly innocuous, and perhaps even enlightened, both the catalogue and wall plaques in the museums belie a more dogmatic tutorial in the ways that we, as viewers, are asked/guided to view the objects. The familiar distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is replaced by a binary — the fantastic and the sublime — which can scarcely be seen in opposition to the other. The categories of the fantastic and the sublime represent the fearful and the unrepresentable: assumed by many to epitomise non-western and colonised cultures. In a multicultural society where such politically sensitive issues are regularly interrogated, the curators still insist on incorporating such categories into their hermeneutic system to allow for practices of viewing to evoke a ‘sense of wonder’.

The Roberts’s hope is that the African art objects on display will excite a sense of wonder in the viewer. In the catalogue, the Roberts begin by stating that their ‘thesis is a radical departure from most contemporary writing about African art and material culture’ (p. 6), for what they consider is the active and creative interaction between people and objects.² Their
purpose is to explain to viewers in the West how a creative interaction with objects occurs. In their explication of the radical practice of viewing and collecting which they are proposing, they turn to influential thinkers on modernity such as Gaston Bachelard, Walter Benjamin and more recently, Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai and James Clifford. Their research gestures to a knowledge of larger political frameworks of cultural appropriation, the collecting and displaying of non-western objects, and even to the continuing significance of colonialism in the dealing of such objects. Yet ultimately they often seem to miss the point of the theory they utilise. Indeed, many of their statements re-echo the assumptions about non-western, so-called ‘primitive’, art that reigned so strongly for the first half of the twentieth century, assumptions that were severely critiqued a decade ago in the context of the William Rubin exhibit, “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern”, at MoMA.3 There is an explicit attempt to distance themselves from a primitivist discourse; for instance, on the wall of the Museum for African Art, printed in bold letters, there reads: ‘The use of the word primitive is misleading when describing African art. African societies have evolved over many centuries, have built great cities and have recorded their history (in Africa) since at least the tenth century.’ However, it is this naively ironic statement which is emblematic of the exhibit and catalogue (does the statement not implicitly affirm the notion of the primitive, as opposed to its constructed nature?).

As I look closely at this specific exhibition catalogue, A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Faletti Collection, I hope some of the points I make will address deeper concerns within the project of displaying non-western art or the art of an other. We have come a long way in attempting to understand the intricacies, contradictions and exoticist assumptions that permeate the contentious practice of collecting, owning and exhibiting non-western, colonised and minority art (especially those arts that were once deemed ‘primitive’ and ‘tribal’). Nevertheless, we still belong to a society that fetishises what is perceived as ‘primitive’ and ‘other’. Such images are heavily circulated, and not only in the West’s world of museum culture and art markets, but in advertising and retail shops. While society increasingly covets these images and objects, the cities which house these spectacular collections are even more racially segregated and torn. These images ambivalently represent people who we can no longer afford to relegate as ‘other’ when they live next to us as neighbours, both literally and figuratively, in a multicultural society and transnational world. It is important to understand the concept of the ‘other’ in the formation of the modern western self, and the presence of the West in the formation of non-western modern selves, to participate in a dialogue which respects heterogeneous subjects who are continuously redefining themselves.

Face Mask, Eastern Segou region, Mali, late 19th–early 20th century wood, copper and indigo, h: 28.5 cm
Photo courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum
celebrate this active interaction between people and objects, and turn to the work of Gaston Bachelard to look for a theory of praxis. As the Roberts note, Bachelard urged his readers to 'live closely to familiar, everyday things', so as to 'live slowly, thanks to their fellowship, and so yield to dreams which have a past, yet in which there is always something fresh and new'. They go on to quote him:

Who nowadays can say 'my electric bulb' as in bygone years he would have said 'my lamp'? How are we to go on dreaming when there is such a decline in possessive adjectives, in the adjectives that spoke so clearly of the fellowship we enjoyed with our own objects? (p. 7)

It is here that the writers locate what they see as a fundamental problem, an inability to view actively: there is a loss of familiarity with objects due to the process of modernity and modernisation. To make their point, the Roberts play on Bachelard’s use of the kerosene lamp. They write:

[Bachelard’s] example was the kerosene lamp used in most parts of the world before rural electrification projects replaced nuanced shadows with incandescent glare. Similar lamps light the nights in much of Africa today. (p. 7, my emphasis)

The loss of the lamp comes to symbolise the lost potential of the creative self through the alienation of modernity:

As opposed to the alienation from the vitality of things frequently felt by Western or Westernized people of the twentieth century, many Africans foster and preserve poetic intimacy with objects. (p. 7)

But what surprising statements these are, given the care the Roberts take to contextualise the objects and to utilise postcolonial insights in their thesis. The Roberts relegate Africa to a static temporality, while attributing our past to their present.

The Roberts seem to be nostalgic for a time gone by — a pastoral, truthful, pure time that needs to be recultivated to redeem us from alienation. Indeed, Bachelard laments the loss of subjectivity caused by an overbearing

Although the categories of the fantastic and the sublime were what initially caught my attention in A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Faletti Collection, I would first like to look at two other categories — possession and connoisseurship — that mark a significant presence in the Roberts’s theory of wonder in practices of viewing.

In the catalogue, the Roberts argue that there is a distinction between practices of viewing in the West and Africa. They state that while most westerners feel a sense of wonder by looking at objects, through the personal or collective experiences that they bring to the object, for many Africans the objects inspire awe themselves — there is a reciprocal relationship with the object. The Roberts
modernity, with its pragmatism and efficient productivity, where everything is just so precisely regulated. However, Bachelard does not seek to re-establish a pre-modern time, as the Roberts seem to suggest. The inverse relationship he writes of, between possessive adjectives and modernity, involves the loss of poetic intimacy and familiarity with the object that allow for a creative self, and hence, the rise of use value and alienation. Bachelard’s reveries on the lamp are symbolic of a relationship that can still be attained through poetry — a relationship that is non-productive in nature and urges dreams to flourish, ultimately changing society itself. Bachelard speaks of the revolutionary uses of art. Poetry allows man the power to resist alienation (not unlike the surrealist conceptions of art as transformative). Since modern life reduces everything to its use value, poetry has the potential to transcend the limits of utilitarianism. Bachelard is not asking that we turn our backs on modern life, but to try to forge active relations between ‘subjects’. Poetry can help us regain a sense of fellowship with other subjects — either as person or thing — to fulfil the potential of our creative selves. From this perspective, poetry is not the recreation of a past, but completely innovative, breaking both with past and present, through the exploration of possibility with written language. For the Roberts, the past (as the African present) is memorialised. They use the symbol of the lamp to fix Africa in a pre-modern time and space, and they do not push the idea of a non-productive relationship that would allow for a reconstruction of the self. The Roberts end up stating that Africans are immune to the disruptions/alienation of modern life, because theirs is a pre-modern time. The celebration of this is reminiscent of exoticist or primitivist projects. Even though such projects speak against colonialism, it is in order to leave such ‘pure’ spaces untrammelled by the effects of modernisation which colonialism births. The underlying assumptions dehistoricise and homogenise African reality. To locate the Africans in a pre-modern time and in binary opposition to the West’s modern and historical time is no longer credible; it only perpetuates the myths about the self and the self’s other.

The Roberts hope to urge their readers/viewers to forge a relationship of familiarity with the African objects on display, in order to create a reciprocal ‘sense of wonder’ through the act of viewing. As the Roberts attempt to build on Bachelard’s analogy of the lamp, what occurs is a corruption of specificity that is neither creative nor viable. The Roberts want to create this fellowship with objects in two ways which continue to make it difficult to maintain Bachelard’s argument:

1) They ask that the museum patrons allow the objects on display an active role in this fellowship of familiarity. Yet both the Museum for African Art and the Smart Museum were set up in such a way that the physical structures of display demanded a traditional relationship from the viewer, based on contemplation from a distance. How can a traditional museum exhibit evoke a sense of familiarity, when from the very beginning of the exhibition it was made clear to patrons that the objects of art are old and valuable and must not be touched? (At the Smart Museum there were several plaques forbidding the viewer’s touch.) The exhibit attempted to push boundaries in methods of display in that it made use of ethnographic texts and photographs of the objects in performance. However, neither method constitutes an innovative approach anymore. What occurred was that the ethnography spoke as true knowledge and unquestionable authority, and the photographs supported a sense of a timeless Africa when nineteenth century pieces were juxtaposed with contemporary pictures of the ‘objects’ in performance.

Is it possible for a traditional museum setting to enable a viewer to forge a relationship of familiarity, in the Bachelardian sense, with an object? The reason that many Africans have a coveted relationship with objects is because they utilise the objects in a very different manner; these objects perform a function in the practices of daily life. In the West, these objects are part of an art collection: they are being exhibited as art. As art, they become precious commodities that circulate within that huge structure called the market — involving galleries, museums and private collectors alike. If a museum is to call for a redefinition of its art objects, then it is exigent that there is a disruption of traditional patterns of viewing facilitated by non-traditional
methods of display. Otherwise all that is reaffirmed is the active viewing the passive: an orthodox relationship of viewer to object.

2) Perhaps even more importantly, the Roberts are not using the analogy of the Bachelardian lamp for familiar everyday objects, but African 'art' objects which have a very long and controversial history in the West. Is there not a difference when one uses objects from other cultures to evoke a comfortable familiarity, specifically cultures which have played a part in the West's history of colonialism and neo-colonialism? As an exhibition of African art, the curators must be attentive to the twentieth century history of collecting and displaying African objects — deemed either aesthetic or ethnographic due to the exhibition hall which displays them. Earlier on in this century when there was an explosion of interest in what was then called primitive art, modern artists and collectors coveted these pieces because they represented 'irreducible strangeness': they were seen as the antithesis of the modern. But primitivism is not the negation of the modern, it is an integral part of modernity and its concomitant project of colonialism. Many collectors of primitive art, like the surrealists, were anti-colonialists, but their anti-colonialism stemmed largely from their nostalgia for an authentic space that would be untouched by the processes of modernisation and modernity. These artists

Processional Crosses, Ethiopia, 12th–15th century, bronze or brass, h: 33 cm and 28.5 cm
Photo courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum
and collectors were perhaps instrumental in the founding of the category ‘primitive art’ (changing the taxonomy from artefact to art) and/or it is crucial that we remain cognisant of the imperial arrogance that underpins their search for and collecting of the other, the exotic, the primitive — even the fantastic and the sublime.7

It is a question of possession that undergirds the discourse of primitive art in the early twentieth century, and it is this same notion which pervades the Roberts’s thesis. The Roberts take Bachelard literally to understand modernity as a loss of possessive adjectives, hence a loss of possession and so, of course, familiarity. The Roberts introduce the section ‘Collecting the Self’ — a panegyric for the collector of the exhibit, Richard Faletti — with:

Bachelard’s sense of modern Western loss of the possessive adjectives attached to things should not be interpreted as extending to everyone in the West, of course. In particular, collectors of art dedicate themselves and their time, financial resources, and home spaces to the defiance of just such alienation.

They equate modernity and its symptom of alienation to the loss of an ability to possess, so that the art collector is heralded as defying such structural discontent. We have long been a society which possesses, a society of ‘possessive individualism’ where the individual is free in so far as he is proprietor of his person and capacities.8 In the seventeenth century Locke was already stating that it is the materiality of possession or property which gives us personhood: ‘Man... hath by Nature a Power... to preserve his Property, that is his Life, Liberty, and Estate.’9 Possession has to do with rights and entitlement. It is not that the art collector transgresses boundaries, but that he has the political and economic freedoms to engage with modernity as a flâneur. More generally, even if western modernity saw the demise of a certain familiarity with objects, the West definitely had an expanded notion of ownership through the possession of colonial territories. It was this fact of ownership as empire that was pivotal in the creation of the illusion of a strong and integral national identity. What is important to note is that with empire, there is a fracturing of identity in the metropolis. ‘Daily life and existential experience in the metropolis’, writes Fredric Jameson, ‘can now no longer be grasped immanently; it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself’.10

There is a fracturing of the self with the act of possessing that entails empire. So is it possible to talk about searching for a unified subject through collecting, as the Roberts do? Does collecting have a sense of breaking boundaries, of searching for the impossible? Maybe some collections do, like Walter Benjamin’s collection of books, with which he writes of both the collection and the collecting with a passionate headiness.11 Although the Roberts liken Faletti’s collection to Benjamin’s, ‘The Divine Comedy, Spinoza’s Ethics, and The Origin of Species’12 are not African objects of art. If a collector can circumvent the alienation of modernity through the evocation of familiarity due to ownership, what occurs when the object is not familiar, when it is an imperial object; is there still the splintering of identity? How do we understand the collecting of African art when we are no longer in an age of high colonialism? How do we understand African art that is no longer deemed primitive or tribal, but categorised as African, where Africa itself is a western construction? Are there political underpinnings, motivations, contexts when we talk about the collecting of art in a postcolonial situation, or more aptly a neo-colonial situation?13 Edward Said has taught us that culture is never innocent: cultural production, cultural collecting and cultural viewing will always be implicated in larger political and economic structures.

Collectors, or connoisseurs, are also part of a larger collective, a larger political structure. It is this fact that the Roberts seem to miss. The Roberts indulge in the idealisation of the connoisseur. They celebrate the syncretism of the connoisseur’s collection:

Idiosyncratic juxtapositions... characterize the homes of most collectors of African art, stretching the boundaries of expectation, challenging familiarity, and conveying multiple messages about personal aesthetics, worldliness, appreciation of other cultures, and the politics of possession. (p. 12)
categories as the fantastic and the sublime? In ‘African Art as a Question Mark’, V. Y. Mudimbe writes:

African culture, and more visibly African art, are historical products of a complex process: the metamorphosis of concrete realities into abstract categories, and complementarily, the possible transformation of those realities into cultural objects with a financial value. In other words, African realities become, within anthropological frameworks, objects of knowledge; they are understood, classified, and defined as cultural signs from a Western cultural and epistemological tradition.\(^{18}\)

**A touchstone of the fantastic [is]... the impression of irreducible strangeness.**

In *A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Faletti Collection*, this statement by Roger Caillios introduces the next section, ‘The Fantastic in African Art’, as epigraph. Strangely enough, the statement stands in direct opposition to Bachelard’s concept of familiarity and fellowship with objects that the Roberts set up as their working paradigm. There are many such discrepancies in their almost fanciful use of the categories fantastic and sublime. The Roberts turn to Kant to understand the sublime, yet they disassociate his implicit opposition between the beautiful and the sublime to set up a duality between the fantastic and the sublime: a move which only serves to undermine them, as such a duality reinforces a coupling of fear, terror and strangeness with the other. The genealogies of the terms make apparent their subversive uses when applied to non-western or colonised cultures. The Roberts acknowledge this:

...great care must be taken to avoid the pitfall of applying the term [the fantastic] to artistic expression deemed to fall outside of a Western canon, and that may therefore serve as a convenient, legitimising foil for Western ‘aesthetic quality’. Such a mistaken position inexorably asserts ‘the privileged position of the First World... while simultaneously separating the form from its... meaning’ derived from an object’s original setting. As Mari Carmen Ramírez further suggests, by identifying non-western art as ‘fantastic’, we may be unconsciously indulging in ‘modernism’s self-gratifying discourse’ that inevitably leads to ‘fatal misappropriation and misrepresentation of other people’s cultures.’ This is clearly not our intention here. (p 17)

Nevertheless their intentions are betrayed by the categories themselves. In her article, ‘Beyond the Fantastic’, Mari Carmen Ramírez writes, ‘if the “fantastic other” can still be a relevant category with which to approach Latin American art, it is because the neo-colonial mind-set still governs museum practice in both continents’.\(^{19}\) The critiques against the use of the sublime in these contexts are just as trenchant. The postcolonial critic, Sara Sulier, argues that the sublime is used to describe colonial histories, in order to equate the historical realities of these peoples to aesthetic horror: the sublime becomes indistinguishable from the intimacy of colonial terror;\(^{20}\) while in another critical reading, Donald Pease writes: ‘Despite all the revolutionary rhetoric invested in the term, the sublime has, in what we could call the politics of historical formation, always served conservative purposes.\(^{21}\) It takes more than good intentions to recast terms that have indelible histories of othering and subjugation. The Roberts are not successful in demonstrating how they could use either category in a revolutionary, innovative or illuminating manner. Instead of sufficiently explaining how they intend to reappropriate the terms, they usually allow the terms to speak for themselves with such symptomatic statements: the sculpture is ‘a figure of fantastic hesitation between violence and grace’ (p. 21); the mask ‘allowed initiands a fantastic glimpse of the spirit world as they learned the essential secrets of being’ (p. 23); ‘the fantastic exterior of the mask is matched by a sublime interior’ (p. 38). The Roberts hope to achieve a sense of wonder through the use of these categories; instead, it is once more the never ending story of how different (fearful, strange, troubling, fantastic, sublime) these objects are.

The fundamental problem with this catalogue lies in the Roberts’s stated conceptions of art. If they really believed that art (its production and consumption, aesthetic experience) is culturally constructed, a part of a larger ideological framework, then they would
not be able to use categories such as the fantastic and the sublime to delineate African art because of the contested nature of these categories. The lack of criticality, in the hope of achieving a sense of wonder in viewing non-western objects, becomes a question of a pure aesthetic experience and the conviction in the inviolable category of Art.22 Even though the curators state that they do not believe in a universal notion of art, the catalogue upholds the autonomy of art, the transhistorical category of Art. Art becomes a static category, and the Roberts cannot and do not look at its nuances — especially at questions of enunciation. It matters who speaks, who is spoken to, who views, who studies, who disseminates knowledge.23 Even though the Roberts are attempting to delineate a practice to inculcate a sense of wonder in the viewer, what they never attempt to do is look at who might actually be the viewer. The exemplary viewer becomes the collector, Richard Faletti. We are a long way from an individual who is marked by race, class and/or gender. The Roberts are defining a hermeneutic system pledged to the viewer, but with so little regard for the actual viewer. What exactly will viewers think when they are told to look at these objects through the fantastic and the sublime, while simultaneously coveting a sense of familiarity and ownership? What of the viewer whose life history has more in common with the cultures we are viewing than with the unmarked individual? Is not one person’s story of possession, another’s story of dispossession? The Roberts never look at how art is imbricated in other institutions, in politics, in economics; there is an erasure of ideology in their study of art. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that an iconography that acknowledges the historical reality of ideology moves towards an ethical system of interpretation based on recognition for another subject:

The main importance of recognition as the link between ideology and iconology is that it shifts both ‘sciences’ from an epistemological ‘cognitive’ ground (the knowledge of objects by subjects) to an ethical, political, and hermeneutic ground (the knowledge of subjects by subjects, perhaps even Subjects by Subjects). The categories of judgement shift from terms of cognition to terms of recognition, from epistemological categories of knowledge to social categories like ‘acknowledgment’.24

To work towards a study of art that understands art as a shifting and changing category involves not an appropriation of the other, but the recognition and respect for the other as subject. This method of theory and praxis is ethical, humanistic and exiguous in a global society. If art, as a critical concept, is a transformative category and has the ability to revolutionise society (can we afford to lose the idealism of a Bachelard or Benjamin?), what can it make happen in terms of a global community that is still disjointed from a legacy of colonialism?

2 Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen Roberts, A Sense of Wonder: African Art from the Falletti Collection, Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, 1997, p 6. All references to A Sense of Wonder will henceforth be found in the text.
6 At one point, there is a photograph of a contemporary procession to ‘contextualise’ three processional crosses dated around the 12th–15th centuries. Although the photographs might have been incorporated to demonstrate how these objects are used in daily and ceremonial life, they often give the effect of a forever unchanging Africa.
7 I am simplifying the ambivalence which marks this discourse. At the time, it was, in some ways, a very valuable move to have these artefacts understood as art, one reason being that it engendered a certain respect for the art and culture of other societies. Since then we have had countless and necessary critiques against the category of primitive art. However, when we look at this category in its historical context, the ambivalence creates a productive tension. At the same time that avant-garde artists were trading, musing and fetishising primitive art, these artists were also speaking out
against colonialism. There was a valorisation of and identification with these objects and cultures that constituted ‘a kind of strategic self-othering in relation to dominant norms’. As Kobena Mercer writes in another context, ‘At what point do such identifications result in an imitative masquerade…? At what point do they result in ethical and political alliances? How can we tell the difference?’ (‘Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Heteroerotic Imaginary’, in (eds) Bad Object-Choices, How Do I Look?, Bay Press, Seattle, pp 169–222).


9 Quoted from ibid, p 198.


13 What I mean by neo-colonialism is the political, economic (often through the presence of multinational companies) and/or military dominance of superpowers over societies which are less advanced economically and technologically.

14 Pierre Bourdieu (in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1984) argues that taste (the mark of the connoisseur) is not an innate gift, but functions as a marker of class.


17 Sally Price (in Primitive Art in Civilized Places, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989) makes a powerful argument about the anonymity of African artists. She states that there are ways to identify the artists, but it is in the interests of the West to keep these artists anonymous for the art is then rendered timeless and definitely other.


21 Donald Pease, ‘Sublime Politics’, Boundary 2, Spring/Fall 1984, p 275.

22 The sublime represents itself as a pure aesthetic experience. Jean-François Lyotard (in ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’, in Postmodernism: A Reader, (ed) Thomas Docherty, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p 250) writes that when the sublime supplanted poetics and rhetoric, it is ‘no longer “how does one make a work of art?”, but “what is it to experience an affect proper to art?”’ We are still not at a space that views art critically.

23 See Kobena Mercer’s article, ‘Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Differences and the Heteroerotic Imaginary’, op cit, for an illuminating understanding on the question of enunciation, the politics of representation and identity/identification.