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Shadow Plays: Reading between the Lines in Postmodernist Criticism

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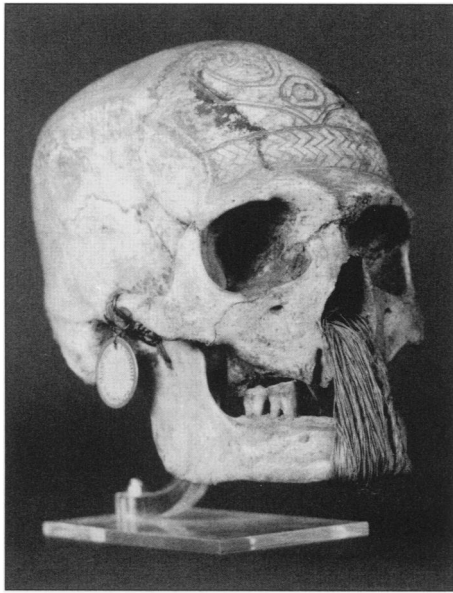
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 a f r i c a n a r t

structive comments about how matters could be improved. I certainly learned nothing new about African arts or African societies or even about dealers, collectors, museums, or scholars.

T. O. Beidelman  
 New York University

### Are Aesthetics Real?

In focusing on why an object might be considered authentic rather than why it is a fake, Kasfir raises the level of discourse in which we have been engaged. But that makes her article useful; it doesn't make her right. It is useful to see that a good part of our difficulty in discussing fakes comes from asking the question "How can I tell if this is a fake or not?" instead of "Why shouldn't I call this authentic too, whoever made it, and for whatever purpose, and whenever?" It is useful to bring the prejudices of the art market into the light, but Kasfir's attacks on Western aesthetic judgments are only peripheral, and in the end those judgments stand and the attack looks like bias.

She seems to want us to like everything equally. She complains that what is authentic need not have a pure tribal<sup>1</sup> style uninfluenced by European contact. There she is right, and collectors must see that authenticity is not limited to objects currently sought after. Let Kasfir and other scholars decide what is culturally authentic. But don't dare tell collectors

what is good art, and don't take from them their right to decide (and sometimes to be wrong). This is the hot issue between the art community and the scholars. The art community thinks it knows as much as anyone about what is and isn't a good work of art. The scholars think the (Western) art community should not be making that judgment about "their" or the Africans' artifacts.

The facts of intertribal and indeed of colonial influence, examples of which are particularly well explained by Schildkrout and Keim in *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*, need to be acknowledged, and purity of style should not be worshiped slavishly. Kasfir also makes a strong point in decrying the rejection of an object because the maker's name is known, and she sees no reason why we should not widen our horizons and be prepared in principle to accept fine tourist pieces. All valid provided we are allowed the right to judge quality for ourselves.

Kasfir faults collectors' preference for old objects.<sup>2</sup> We do sometimes go too far and err in paying a lot just for "old wood." We use signs of long use—apparent age—as a crutch in establishing authenticity, and a useful crutch it is, even though age can be simulated. She says that Africans usually don't share this prejudice; I should rather think they do, or why do they preserve and repair so many objects—simple ones like pulleys—when a plain new one could do as well? References, however, to the point of view of the African

artist carry little weight: think of the non-sense Western artists write about their own and others' work. References to the African general audience are similarly unconvincing: you might as well ask the man in the street—or me for that matter—what he thinks of a de Kooning. No, the enthusiast doesn't know everything, but he knows something.

*The vamp in Oklahoma! says about being seduced, "Whatcha gonna do, spit in his eye?" I am contemplating a Dogon door lock. It presents itself as an agreeable shape, the body gently bowed at the sides and bulging in the center to accommodate the crossbar. The ends of the crossbar turn up, and now the object suggests a kanaga mask. Instead of an abstract form, a head, torso, and legs can be perceived, and the geometric incisions evolve into double figures with raised arms, a belly, sex, pairs of feet. Encrustation of millet and edges worn down to polished wood tell its history of use. What am I going to do? Spit in its eye?*

Marc L. Ginzberg  
 Eastchester, New York  
 Notes, page 100

### Shadow Plays: Reading between the Lines in Postmodernist Criticism

The best of postmodernist criticism divulges as much as it discerns, illuminating at the same time as demystifying. The least interesting of such studies retrace well-worn paths, replacing old myths with new. The difference between the two lies to a considerable degree



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Ibo tribe, Nigeria, 19th century.  
Female figure 46.5" h. Male figure 45" h.



in the author's ability to locate essential questions and to critically examine associated issues. Kasfir's essay succeeds on one level and falls short on another. Like many critical essays of this kind, the work is bold, provocative, and intentionally irritating. However, many of Kasfir's arguments have been articulated elsewhere (earlier works, however, are not always cited); her history is sometimes faulty; and her desire for the polemical leads occasionally to dubious conclusions.

On history: Kasfir writes that "what we call 'traditional society' is a legacy of our Victorian past" [p. 41]. While the Victorians can be accused of a lot, related values accorded "traditional society" date from a far earlier period, going back at least to the ancient Greeks. Kasfir states additionally that "the idea that before colonialism, most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent, and highly integrated has been such a powerful paradigm and so fundamental to the West's understanding of Africa that we are obliged to retain it even when we now know that much of it is an oversimplified fiction" [p. 41]. This statement makes one question if Kasfir has been reading much of the last twenty years of African art scholarship. Very few scholars have *not* critically addressed this very issue. The same for the myth of one tribe/one style, an idea that predates William Fagg, and which he along with Douglas Fraser, René Bravmann, and many others have in various ways argued

against. Interestingly, numerous parallels can be drawn between African art "tribal" classification systems and botanical taxonomies (see Blier, "Art Systems and Semiotics," *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1988–89).

On curators: According to Kasfir, "In most of the major exhibitions of African art currently circulating in the United States there is little attempt, either explicit or implicit, to subvert omniscient curatorial authority" [p. 41]. While several exhibitions in fact have explored related issues (most importantly Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim's on collecting in northern Zaire), I would question the basic premise of Kasfir's statement. Omniscient curatorial authority is nothing short of a myth. These days, when exhibitions are so driven by federal funding guidelines (and reviews), museum boards, community concerns, educational requirements, and the like, curators often find themselves more the focus of conflicting internal and external demands than the voices of autonomy and unassailable expertise.

On collecting: Kasfir states "...what we could call canonical African art—that which is collected and displayed and hence authenticated and valorized as 'African art'—was and is only produced under conditions that ought to preclude the very act of collecting" [p. 42]. In some cases yes, but I can think of no culture that does not collect (even in Africa) and valorize certain (particularly for-

eign) forms. Moreover, there is no such thing as an artwork that is truly "authentic"—if we mean by that free from admixture or influence from the outside. Across history the most creative art centers have always been the places where a diversity of peoples, values, and traditions is found (Rome, Venice, Paris, New York, Djenné, Freetown, Kumasi, Abomey, Lagos—to name but a few).

Again on collecting: Kasfir asks "...who creates meaning for African art? It is difficult not to conclude that it is largely Western curators, collectors, and critics (whose knowledge...is deftly mediated by entrepreneurial African traders along the way) rather than the cultures and artists who produce it" [p. 47]. Not true. Yes, the West conveys new (different) meanings to African works, but why privilege this meaning base over all the others? To do so, one could argue, only perpetuates a sense of preeminence of the "colonial" voice.

On art: "...prior to the twentieth century, African artifacts were not 'art' in either African or Western eyes" [p. 47]. Kasfir is not the first to say this, but she stresses the point. The philosophical issues raised in the context of defining "art" are too complex to go into here, but again history can teach us a lot. In the West, only after the Renaissance were the terms "craft" and "art" differentiated in art taxonomy *vis-à-vis* function and hierarchical value. The Latin root of art, *ars*, finds its source in *artus*, meaning "to join" or "fit

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together." *Kunst*, the German word for art, derives from *kennen*, meaning "to know," hence, know-how. Both terms are closer to the modern sense of craft than art. In turn, although many (most?) cultures in Africa *do* have words for "art," because the etymological bases of such terms are more analogous to recent Western "craft" conceptualization, we have tended to overlook such words (see my "Art Systems and Semiotics," 1988). Here and elsewhere Kasfir assumes a European art model for comparison, which because it is late is relatively atypical even for Europe.

On tourist art: When Douglas Fraser first presented the idea that the Afro-Portuguese ivories were tourist arts, he took great delight

in the shocking effect his statement would have, because so much of art value is tied up with perceptions of prestige and preciousness. If some of the more recent tourist art examples are seen to be more interesting as subjects of intellectual discourse than objects of formal display, this but reaffirms the standard dictum that artistic taste is at once complex and vacillating. As Barthes, Bakhtin, Kristeva, and others have shown us, artworks are identified with many competing and intersecting texts. Through Foucault, among others, we have come to see such texts as having important ideological roots. Kasfir, in mythologizing the West and privileging select Western ideological contexts, in my

view misses the complexity and richness of the multitudinous texts that at once frame and inform African art.

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### Scholars and the Art Networks

What is surprising about the questions of authenticity so clearly delineated by Professor Kasfir? Very little, if you look at the nature of the societies involved—Euro-American and African. Every society reinterprets external cultural elements that it absorbs into its own experiential classificatory and conceptual systems. On the African