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Matthew Angelo Harrison: "African art as found object"
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When Fred Wilson (b.1954) one-upped Picasso's canonical *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; Museum of Modern Art, New York) by mounting a replica of a *kifwebe* mask onto a life-size reproduction of the painting in *Picasso/Whose Rules?* **FIG. 1**, it was an emancipatory tactic aimed at liberating the African object from European Modernism's historic hold. Over the face of the seated figure, Wilson attached the wooden facsimile with a video running behind its eyes, which showed the artist and two Senegalese friends staring back. The men ask questions in three different languages: 'whose rules decided what is great?' and 'if your modern art is our traditional art, does that make our contemporary art your cliché?'.[1]

Wilson's use of the mask as a showcase for Senegalese men speaking about cultural 'rules' is a far cry from Picasso's generalised and anonymous reference. In Wilson's work, a power dynamic has been disrupted such that the mask highlights African agency as opposed to Africa as a subjugated muse. The presence of this traditional *kifwebe* exemplifies a notable shift within the larger practice of found object art today, a medium that animates much of contemporary sculpture. The transmutation of banal, anti-art, mass-produced objects, first made visible to the art world in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, has given way to myriad diverse categories of objects transformed into works of art.[2] As part of this wider array of often provocative appropriations, traditional West and Central African masks and sculptures now appear in a large number of works by contemporary African American artists: examples of African art have surfaced as found objects[3]

FIG. 1 *Picasso/Whose Rules?*, by Fred Wilson. 1991. Photograph, wood mask and video, 200 by 196.9 by 17.8 cm. (© Fred Wilson; courtesy Pace Gallery).

Masks such as the *kifwebe* that feature in Wilson's work would have been part of elaborate ceremonies, to be worn with a woven costume in a ritual dance. These are performative objects enacted at the behest of a ruler as 'an authoritative instrument associated with healing and mystical control'.[4] Whether Wilson specifically relies on this understanding is unclear, but the idea of troubling Picasso's high modernism is certainly at play and is undoubtably one of the driving forces behind the more recent use of African art as found objects.[5] It is about reclaiming Modernism's reliance on Africa by those who may have a bigger stake: for many Black American artists, this strategy means holding space for their own history.[6]

Traditional African objects and their three-dimensional facsimiles only emerged as found material in the hands of Black artists in the United States beginning in the 1980s. They were noticeably absent from earlier periods of pronounced African American identity in art, such as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Some images of African masks and figures were rendered and reproduced, but the objects themselves appear to have been considered off-limits as sculptural material. Even those few examples of specific African objects in paintings and prints from the early part of the century, such as *Fétiche et Fleur* (*Fetish and Flowers*; 1932–33; Museum of African Art, Los Angeles) by the Harlem Renaissance painter Palmer Hayden or Norman Lewis's misidentified *Baulé Mask* (1935), were anomalous motifs by artists focusing more on genre paintings of Black life in America.[7] The work of Loïs Mailou Jones, which consistently incorporates masks in a Cubist style, may be the only exception at the time.

Although the writings of Alain Locke in the early to mid-twentieth century, in particular his essay 'The legacy of the ancestral arts' (1925), encouraged African Americans to examine African art, his proposition does not appear to have resulted in much direct appropriation. Similarly, there are very few examples of African art as standard motifs in the work of Black artists from the 1960s. Works by members of the art collective AfriCOBRA, such as Carolyn Lawrence's *Black Children Keep Your Spirits Free* (1972; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville) or Barbara Jones-Hogu's print *Heritage* (1970), depict African masks. However, the AfriCOBRA lexicon primarily utilised active and colourful mark making as a signifier of what they saw as the rhythmic energy of Africa, as opposed to the direct representation of masks or other traditional objects. As David Driskell (1931–2020) put it, the absence of referring to traditional African art at the time was informed by the fact that 'contemporary African American artists didn't want to look at their classical traditions. They wanted to be contemporary'.[8]

There were, however, several notable exceptions. Among these is Hale Woodruff's mural *The Art of the Negro* (1950–51) at Clark Atlanta University, which features African masks in his story of the Black diaspora.[9] The many appropriated images of African masks in the collaged works of Romare Bearden also certainly set the stage for the later flourishing of this type of image and choice of object. But perhaps the general lacuna of this material was generated by the fact that many Black artists found using images of African masks and sculptures too reminiscent of white European Modernism's penchant for exoticising 'the primitive' or, in the case of real objects created for religious purposes, considered them to be too sacred.[10] It is probable that the idea of sourcing actual objects to be incorporated into sculptures only began to take shape in the 1980s, after Postmodernism's promiscuous mix of styles and strategies ushered in a more expansive approach to what constituted a found object.[11]

FIG. 2 *Western Currents*, by Radcliffe Bailey. 2012. Mixed media on canvas, 228.6 by 365.13 by 7.62 cm. (© Radcliffe Bailey; courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

For African American artists, the inclusion of traditional African masks and figures is a provocative, transcultural gambit for evoking Africa in the West. It is an invention with a long and changing narrative that now includes contemporary artists, such as David Hammons (b.1943), Matthew Angelo Harrison (b.1989), Nari Ward (b.1963), Cauleen Smith (b.1967), Theaster Gates (b.1973) and others, who conjure legacy, identity and power by drawing on synecdoche from the continent.[12] The figures and masks in their art are mostly artisanal replicas made for the marketplace, but here authenticity is not of primary importance to these artists, who instead find the visceral, bodily affect – the empirical realness of the object itself – hauntingly effective. African masks and sculptures have become important 'Afrotropes' – motifs travelling across time and space as part of a renewed discourse on diasporic states of mind.[13]

The concept of African art as a staple of the Modernist origin story – a vehicle for Picasso and his contemporaries to move away from Classical illusionism towards what was perceived as a more honest and direct strategy for eliciting potent expression – is well studied.[14] Yet there remains much art-historical surmising about the circumstances under which African objects were first discovered by the European avant-garde. Importantly, the 'primitivist' legend has now been punctured by a movement in scholarship that takes on the history of colonialism and racism.[15] The links that can be made between the theft and subsequent possession of stolen artefacts and the commodification and objectification of enslaved people is dramatically illustrated in a work by Radcliffe Bailey (1968–2023), an artist who also deployed classical African sculpture as found objects. In *Western Currents* FIG. 2, a long boat crowded with collaged images of African figural sculptures and masks traverses a choppy sea. Some of these objects have fallen overboard and bob in the water surrounding the vessel. Bailey makes the correspondence between those African bodies stolen into slavery, fated to drown in the Middle Passage, and their sacred, traditional artefacts that were looted and transported to the West.

FIG. 3 *Accumulation d'âmes* (*Accumulation of souls*), by Arman. 1972. African wood masks from Côte d'Ivoire and polyester resin, 52 by 29 by 6.5 cm. (© ADAGP, Paris, and DACS, London; courtesy Arman Studio Archives, New York).

While it is difficult to pinpoint the first African object that was represented in the West as a found object, it seems there were none prior to the installations by Wilson and Hammons in the 1980s. There was, however, one well-known exception by a white European artist. In 1972 the French-born assemblagist Arman (1928–2005) made *Accumulation d'âmes* (*Accumulation of souls*) FIG. 3, embedding two dozen Dan masks in a polyester resin block. Arman was an avid collector of African art, but this use of an array of masks in his own art is unusual. The piece follows the format of the majority of his œuvre: accumulations of the same kind of found object presented in a single vitrine. By employing the African masks as raw material, Arman essentially treated them the same way as other mass-produced objects; perhaps this was the point. The desire to collect in the West had been met by African artisans supplying an abundance of copies of traditional African objects. In essence, the masks and sculptures had become readymades, emptied of their performative and sacred functions. It would be another decade before any Black artist rescued the African object from such a capitalist, colonial hold.

Despite Arman's example, the broader omission of African masks and figures as found objects before Hammons and Wilson remains intriguing. The curator Hamza Walker suggests that the lack of interest in traditional African objects was symptomatic of the Black artist's alienation from them. 'Along with the object being robbed', Walker claimed, 'we were also robbed of the knowledge of them [...] You can't go home again'.[16] Even Hayden recalled in 1969 that finding African art in Paris in the 1930s 'was an interesting discovery [...] a revelation', but also: 'I don't know how much contact we [African Americans] have with the old world, Africa, so to speak. We can't do much any more than they can, any more than a white painter can do'.[17]

It is certainly no coincidence that traditional African masks and figures emerged as found objects in art in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, at a moment when identity politics was becoming a prominent topic in the art world and race and representation were being reconfigured through multiculturalism and postcolonial studies. Earlier, of course, the African independence movements of the 1960s and their coverage in journals such as *Ebony* and *Jet* had opened up discussions in America about African politics, as had the introduction of African art history departments in universities and the increased exhibitions of African art, including the opening of the Museum of African Art, Washington, in 1964.[18]

In Lagos in 1977 the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, known as FESTAC' 77, drew 17,000 participants to the Nigerian city, including many from the United States, to celebrate Black arts and culture. Following The First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966 in Dakar, this event was much larger. The official emblem of the festival, which has since become one of the visual symbols of Nigeria more generally, was a sixteenth-century ivory mask from the Benin Kingdom. The mask is associated with Idia, the first *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) of Benin. Taken by the British during the 1897 Punitive Expedition and held in the British Museum, London (which rejected the application to loan it), the mask adorned posters, publications and souvenirs.[19] The internationalism of the festival precipitated the proliferation of global networks of exhibition systems – biennials, art fairs, international galleries – such that, as Huey Copeland writes, 'at the close of the 20th century [...] for the first time in history, an appreciable number of artists of non-European ancestry figured prominently in the mainstream United States art world'.[20] As such, a semiotics of Black identity would emerge in the United States, one that included more African masks and figures.[21]

Wilson and Hammons arose as key figures in this emergent discourse on Black identity, and their frequent employment of African masks and sculptures helped to establish the terms of this dialogue. Wilson took to challenging African art's standard institutional framing, whereas Hammons worked to excavate the symbolic sacredness of the objects. In Driskell's words 'if anyone should get involved with this material [traditional African art], it should be its descendants. We are the ones who inherited it, through various means. It's our place to say what is Africa to me and what is Africa to the world'.[22] African objects began to show up in the work of Black artists pursuing a different agenda than their Modernist European predecessors, one that spoke to the artists' desire to reclaim their ancestral legacy.

FIG. 4 Installation view of *Fred Wilson: Primitivism: High and Low* at Metro Pictures, New York, 1991. (Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; photograph Larry Qualls).

After Arman's signal manoeuvre of the mask as readymade, Wilson and Hammons, the present author suggests, represent the two principal trends in the recent reappropriation of actual African sculptures and masks. On the one hand, artists have recognised the potential in using African artefacts to critique the ways that modernists such as Picasso and museums like the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), have approached them, and to reclaim what they see as their own heritage. On the other hand, African art objects have offered new ways of conjuring presence and power. In respect to the first trend, MoMA's *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984–85), one of the more infamous exhibitions to showcase the use of African art as formal source material for modernists,[23] proved a tipping point for a number of contemporary Black artists.[24] In 1991 Wilson relied on African objects, among other cultural artefacts, to address the MoMA exhibition in his parodic installation *Primitivism: High and Low* FIG. 4, shown at Metro Pictures, New York.[25] In this work Wilson sought to take control of the 'primitivising' narrative by taking some of the same material and placing it in unexpected arrangements that deconstructed dominant ethnocentric practices.

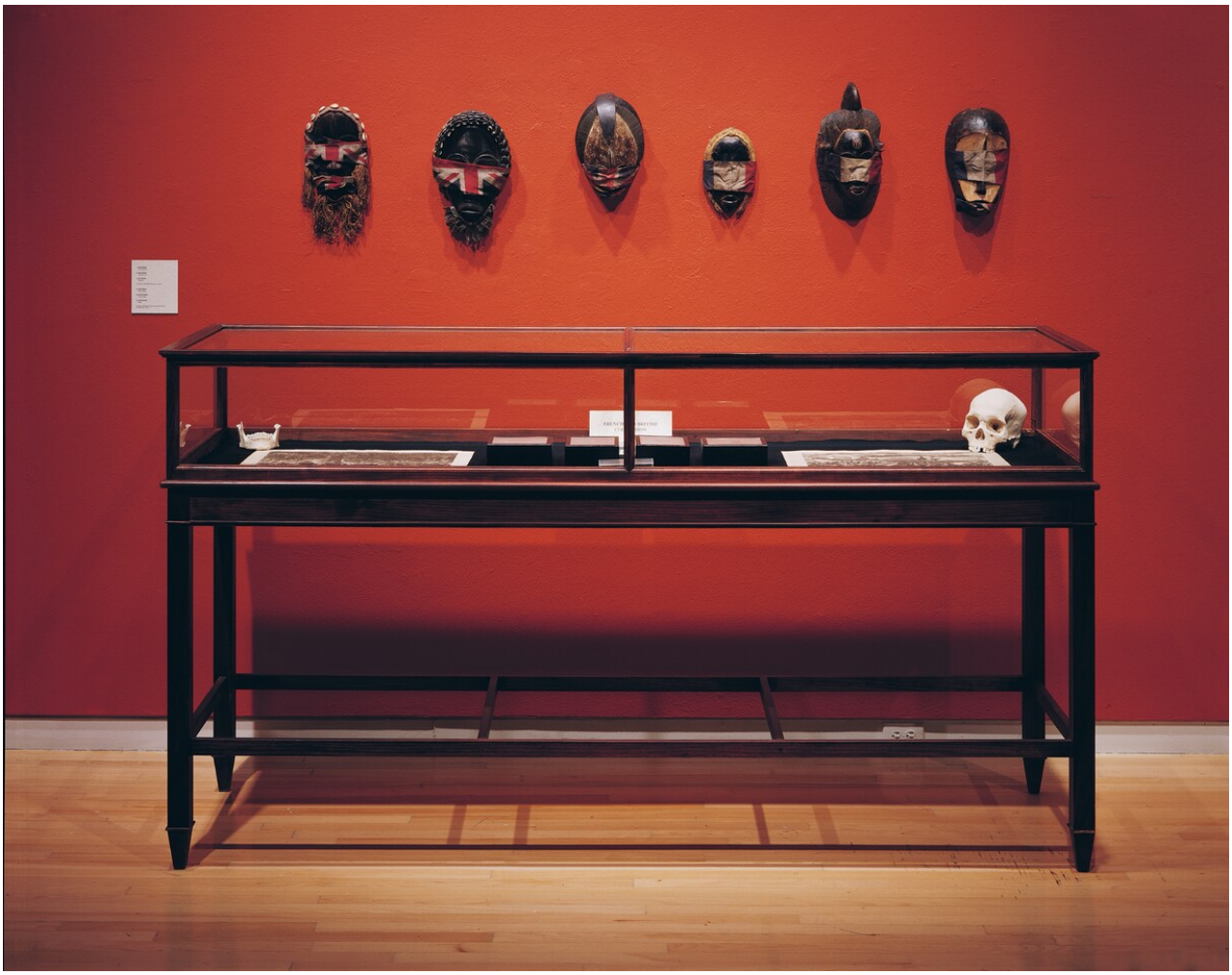

FIG. 5 *Colonial Collection*, by Fred Wilson. 1990. Bug vitrines, jawbone, Mylar labels, prints, skull, wood masks and wood and glass vitrine, overall dimensions 123.8 by 219.7 by 67.9 cm. (© Fred Wilson; courtesy Pace Gallery).

Wilson is known for revealing how museums reinforce certain social and political ideologies by creating installations that disrupt conventional display strategies. In a related exhibition at White Columns, New York, in 1990, Wilson created *The Other Museum*, another interrogation of traditional African art displays. Included was his project *Colonial Collection* FIG. 5, which consisted of a row of seven African tourist market masks hung above a vitrine containing a number of objects and images of imperial conquest. French and British flags covered the eyes or mouths, blinding and muting them. Wilson said 'I wrapped French and British flags around African Masks. These were all trade pieces, but when you put something under that beautiful lighting, it looks, whatever the word means, "authentic". [...] I wrapped the masks because they're sort of hostages to the museum'.[26] On one mask, Wilson projected the moving image of a woman's face whose recorded voice pleads 'Don't just look at me; listen to me. Don't just own me; understand me. Don't just talk about me; talk to me. I am still alive'.[27] As in *Picassso/Whose Rules?*, Wilson's masks were no longer simply commodities traded for aesthetic pleasure or formal paradigms for Modern artists, but rather important avatars of African ways of being and agents for speaking truth to power.

FIG. 6 *Monolith (Dream Catcher)*, by Jefferson Pinder. 2015. Black one-way glass, West African masks and LEDs, 243.8 by 121.9 by 30.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist).

In a kind of call and response, a number of Black artists have followed Wilson's adroit refashioning of the historical displays of African art. The large collection of masks jumbled in a Plexiglas case in *Monolith (Dream Catcher)* FIG. 6 by Jefferson Pinder (b.1970) relates to both Wilson's example as well as the vitrine format of Arman's *Accumulation d'âmes*, although Pinder's masks are more chaotically arranged and mysteriously illuminated by black lights. Pinder sourced three hundred masks from eBay and Craigslist, which are either Dogon, Yoruba or Malian. According to the artist, although some are authentic, the majority are not. The awkward heap of masks encased in a darkened vitrine, stacked and authorless, recalls the kinds of curatorial displays of African art that Michele Wallace so elegiacally described as 'a perfect place to have a good cry'.[28] But Pinder also seizes on the idea of a 'mysterious African force' drawn from the African masks' spiritual energy, with reference to the monolithic structure in Stanley Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey* (1968), the exact dimensions of which Pinder's vitrine follows, and to which the work's title refers. Pinder's addition of *Dream Catcher*, referencing the Indigenous American cultural object, relates the sculpture to a 'spiritual icon that captures thoughts and images', as he describes it, further colliding cultural energies.[29]

FIG. 7 Installation view of *Theaster Gates: Black Chapel* at Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2019, showing *Amplify Africa*, by Theaster Gates. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph Jens Weber).

Theaster Gates has also used historic archives and found materials related to the African American experience, including sourcing African masks as well as making copies of them in different materials. Recently, he turned to working with African objects amassed in vitrines. In *Amplify Africa* FIG. 7, which was shown in a solo exhibition at Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2019, he mixed authentic and tourist market masks from different countries with ones he made, and displayed them in three vitrines.[30] In one, a precariously arranged heap of authentic ceremonial masks and tourist replicas suggested a nineteenth-century ethnographic display gone awry. In another, masks and figures were displayed in juxtaposition with American history books on the Civil War drawn from the artist's personal library. In the third vitrine, masks and authentic African staffs shared the space with toppled metal stands – their failure to support an ideology deftly rendered. Gates writes of the use of traditional African objects:

> This effort has always wooed the west and the appropriations were often surface appropriations without real care to the power behind these forms. I am invested in the power and as with other parts of my work, how accessing the power is sometimes about wrestling with objects, waking them up, cleaning them off and continuing the emotional and physical investments necessary to become part of the work.[31]

A distinctive twist on these museological practices is provided by Matthew Angelo Harrison, who also capitalises on the recent approach to the African artefact as an Afrotrope. Harrison embeds

African sculptures, staffs and automobile engine parts into solid polyurethane resin blocks, then works the surface using a CNC router that he built himself, making patterns drawn from both African cosmology and motifs inspired by the architecture of Detroit **FIG. 8** **FIG. 9**, where he grew up and now lives. Harrison explains:

> When I'm using the [African] object, they've lost the kind of energy level, as it's for sale now. Then I put it through another market, for it to regain a different energy. But it's a shell of itself. These things can't go back to what they were before. A stored and maintained kind of ritual or original intention makes us feel comfortable – the sacredness we are all after. But they don't have it anymore. Because they are synthesized. This is a hard reality for Black artists because there is nothing to look up to. With that in mind you have to create your own [...]. I believe in a strategic severance.[32]

Harrison's hard-edged minimalist encasing embalms the African figure within, locking away its aura and potency. He states: 'I've reassembled the story of these things and embedded them within my own narrative as a Black person who's been completely removed from his ancestry'.[33] This 'abstracted ancestry' pulls another thread out of the knot of how African art as found object speaks to Black identity.

FIG. 8 *Dark Silhouette: Female Figure in Unison*, by Matthew Angelo Harrison. 2019–21. Wooden sculpture from West Africa, polyurethane resin, acrylic and aluminum stand, overall dimensions 170.8 by 27.9 by 31.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph Tim Johnson).

FIG. 9 Detail of FIG.9. (Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; photograph Tim Johnson).

Ancestry, identity, power and magic are aspects of the trajectory that the present author associates with Wilson's work, but each of these elements are more overt in the second contemporary approach to African objects, which is introduced using the example of Hammons. Coming of age in the wake of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, Hammons's engagement with the Black Arts Movement was fuelled using materials that he felt conjured African spirits: he used glass bottles in reference to the 'bottle tree' tradition that originated in West Africa, and he famously talked about having to stop using Black people's hair because of its potency:

> I was actually going insane working with that hair so I had to stop. That's just how potent it is. You've got tons of people's spirits in our hands when you work with that stuff. The same with the wine bottles. A Black person's lips have touched each one of those bottles so you have to be very very careful.[34]

Hammons's frequent use of African masks and sculptures corresponds to this desire to engage with spiritually potent materials and so these ritual objects, even if copies, have become a critical element in his œuvre.[35]

In 1996 when the Guggenheim Museum, New York, held the extensive exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, Hammons responded by creating his own assemblage of approximately a dozen different masks.[36] *Untitled* (1996), with its nested masks from different regions, tightly bound together and topped by a plain white hand mirror – an object that commonly features in *minkisi*, as their shine and radiance represents what Robert Farris Thompson has called 'the flash and arrest of the spirit' – is a complicated metaphor for power and subjugation.[37] As a kind of *nkisi*, it accumulates the spirit of its many masks, but the act of tying them together inescapably recalls the bodies of enslaved people shackled to one another, enduring the horrors of the Middle Passage.[38] The mirror faces outwards, catching the gaze of the viewer in the act of looking, who, by this action, becomes complicit in the narrative. As the artist Dawoud Bey (b.1953), who photographed many of Hammons's earliest performances, wrote in 1994, Hammons 'made a conscious decision to align his work with the Kongo *minkisi* tradition, and use its ritual devices as both visual and spiritual palliative for the Black community'.[39]

FIG. 10 *Untitled*, by David Hammons. 2004. 13 African masks, wood, metal, wire, rope, straw and mirror, 99.1 by 27.9 by 139.7 cm. (Christie's Images and Bridgeman Images).

In 2004 Hammons made another constellation of African masks. In this work, also calle *Untitled* FIG. 10, a tightly tethered collection of different masks includes what appears to be a Gabon reliquary figure at the front, grasping the vertical horns of the mask on which it stands. Mounted on the wall with protruding frontal antlers, the work recalls ubiquitous African hunting trophies. Like the 1996 work, it also features a mirror facing outwards. Hammons's works thus become transcultural minkisi, spaces where the power of various African peoples can be blended and focused against the subjugating hand of their Western colonisers, as suggested through the trope of the trophy and the mirror that catches their gaze. Hammons once said: 'art is a way to keep from getting damaged by the outside world, to keep the negative energy away. Otherwise, if you didn't have a shield to let it bounce off, then you start to really go crazy'.[40]

FIG. 11 Installation view of *David Hammons* at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, 2019. (© David Hammons; courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth; photograph Fredrik Nilsen).

Works incorporating African masks and sculptures featured heavily in Hammons's show at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, in 2019. The series of objects titled *UNDERSTAND* **FIG. 11** were particularly compelling: empty Plexiglas cases resting on raised wooden box pedestals concealed African sculptures hidden underneath, so that viewers had to bend down to get a glimpse of the figure within.[41] Hammons's configuration might refer back to some of the original function of these sacred objects, which 'often stood in dark shrines visible to only a few persons'.[42] Yet as boxed-in figures, they may also recall the claustrophobic confinement of the Middle Passage or the story of Henry Box Brown, who was born into slavery in Virginia and in 1849 shipped himself in a wooden crate to Pennsylvania, where he secured his freedom.

FIG. 12 *Migration: Africa to America I*, by Betye Saar. 2006. Mixed-media assemblage, 35.6 by 30.5 by 16.5 cm. (© Betye Saar; courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art; photograph Tim Lanterman).

The artist Betye Saar (b.1926), a contemporary of Hammons in Los Angeles, has recently engaged with African art as a source for investigating numinous power. In *Migration: Africa to America I* **FIG. 12**, Saar tells the stories of a Black female diaspora, using several African figures alongside other nostalgic, found material. In an installation titled *Red Time* **FIG. 13**, she included African objects in a broader selection of masks from different origins, which were all mounted onto a dramatic cherry-red wall. Saar has long been drawn to so-called 'power objects' from around the world, so it is no surprise that when African objects began to appear as found material in contemporary art, Saar also incorporated them into her work next to personal photographs and other diaristic memorabilia. Her earlier work had boldly repurposed derogatory and racist paraphernalia in an attempt to critique, own and empower them. The same desire to investigate objects specific to Black identity led Saar to African masks and sculptures. By using them, or replicas of them, she summoned the 'accumulated wisdom of the past', as Arnold Rubin wrote in a 1975 *Artforum* article – one that Saar frequently references as being fundamental to her artistic development.[43]

FIG. 13 Installation view of *Betye Saar: Red Time* at Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, 2011. (Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles).

Born in Jamaica but residing in the United States since he was twelve, the artist Nari Ward further explores this conceit. He often culls from the detritus of his New York neighbourhood to create poignant sculptural installations about race, migration, cultural myths and the vagaries of language. Ward also employs with potent effect African objects and motifs in a narrative sharply focused on the history of slavery in America. For example, in a series titled *Anchoring Escapment FIG. 14* he placed several Fang, Effe and Baule sculptures inside longcase clocks; their faces or bodies are partially visible through the glass panes, but they are obscured by the mechanics of the clocks' workings.

FIG. 14 *Anchoring Escapement; Fang* from the series *Anchoring Escapement*, by Nari Ward. 2018. Grandfather clock case, copper sheet with patina, copper nails and African statues, 198.12 by 50.8 by 29.21 cm. (© Nari Ward; courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London, and Galleria Continua, Paris).

The clock faces have been replaced with copper plates etched with the Kongo cosmogram FIG. 15, a fundamental symbol of the Bakongo religion that illustrates the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds. This symbol travelled to America with the transatlantic slave trade and appears in a variety of contexts. Ward encountered the cosmogram pattern cut out in the floorboards of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, which also acted as breathing holes for escaped slaves hiding as they made their way along the Underground Railroad. His inclusion of the cosmogram in *Anchoring Escapement*, as well as the series *Breathing Directions* (2015), reflects Ward's wish to be in 'historical dialogue' with those spaces.44 The inclusion of African sculptures in the clocks of *Anchoring Escapement*, with their affective punch, served as magical surrogates. It was an attempt, he explains, 'to find the form that would validate ancestral connectedness'.45 Like Hammons, Ward sees the potential talismanic property of found objects and seeks to amplify their power in the context of artmaking.

FIG. 15 Detail of FIG.14. (© Nari Ward; courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London, and Galleria Continua, Paris).

Sanford Biggers (b.1970), an artist well known for his artistic repurposing of antique quilts (some incorporating coded signs) as a means to examine the history of the Underground Railroad, has also turned to African objects in his practice. In *Eclipse* FIG. 16, for example, Biggers cleanly bisected a West African tourist market sculpture and displayed the two vertical halves on separate plinths. This act was not intended to be violent, but rather, according to the artist, a 'minimal gesture for maximum impact [...] a dissection of my identity'.[46] Biggers recalls the many African objects in his family home and his sense of them 'being very much alive' and talks of 'trying to work out how to use these objects – the political, the historical, the formal – how to navigate it all'.[47]

FIG. 16 *Eclipse*, by Sanford Biggers. 2006. Painted wood, 2 pieces, each 50.8 by 7.6 by 5.1 cm. (© Sanford Biggers; courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen).

FIG. 17 *Overstood*, by Sanford Biggers. 2017. Sequins, canvas, fabric, tar, glitter, polystyrene and Aqua-Resin, overall dimensions 370.8 by 243.8 by 127 cm. (© Sanford Biggers; courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; photograph Object Studies).

A powerful example of this is *Overstood* FIG. 17 in which Biggers placed a grouping of African sculptures encased in resin and glitter near an enlarged photograph taken in 1970 of Ben Steward, who was Head of the Black Students Union at San Francisco State University; George Murray, a professor at the university and Black Panther member; Bobby Seale, then Chairman of the Black Panthers; and an unnamed fourth figure. Biggers manipulated the photograph to make it appear as a long shadow emanating from the African sculptures: an arrangement that conveys lineage.[48] More recently, Biggers has approached the reuse of African artefacts in a different way: by shooting and then recasting them. In a process that he calls 'ballistic sculpting', he coats a wooden sculpture in wax before firing at it in a shooting range. He then casts the resulting intervention in bronze, creating a new form in a new medium. These works, part of his *BAM* series (2015–ongoing), are a commanding voice in the condemnation of police shootings of Black men. The destructive manipulation of these objects by Biggers is complicated by the artist's sense of the objects' sacred status.[49] For the artist, splicing and shooting does not disempower the objects. Rather, it rekindles their agency in the service of a present and pressing dialogue about violence against Black men, and his own sense of self in relation to that issue. Sanford compares the *BAM* figures to the healing potential of *minkisi* by replacing the traditional hammering of metal nails into a figure with the shooting of metal bullets.[50]

Finally, Cauleen Smith, like Hammons, Ward and Biggers, seeks to activate ancestral legacy through the use of traditional African objects in dialogue with other, more contemporary cultural props.[51] Smith's video installation *We Already Have What We Need* FIG. 18 installed at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, in 2020, juxtaposed large video projections with assorted objects, including Baule *Ibeji* twin figures and ancestral portraits from Côte d'Ivoire.[52] These sculptures serve as the principal agents in a story about the transformative power of art in a well-lived life. The installation included five projection screens, each over six metres high, displaying film montages of landscapes borrowed from such Hollywood films as *Eat Pray Love* (2010), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Fargo* (1996) and *Erin Brockovich* (2000) – all stories with white women protagonists – as well as live-feed CCTV footage of the plants, ceramics, musical instruments, African figures and portraits and other objects that she set out on five velvet-covered tables.

The African sculptures loom large on the screens in an epic gesture of Black presence amid Hollywood's expansive landscapes of whiteness. Smith's selected objects represent the 'stuff we accumulate to fulfill deeply personal needs that range from food, shelter, and medicine to art, music, and spirituality'.[53] In this context, the African sculptures become part of the memorabilia of her lived experience, rather than distant ethnographic relics. They are 'from where I am descended', Smith explains. 'They have a long material and sophisticated history and I don't have to reinvent things'.[54] That these traditional artefacts belong to what she calls the 'mundane' objects that fashion a life is testament to the commonality of their presence in contemporary art.

FIG. 18 Installation view of *Cauleen Smith: Give It Or Leave It* at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, 2019–20. (© Cauleen Smith; courtesy the artist).

The return of African art as found object speaks strongly to recent commitments to racial justice and critical race theory. Within this context, contemporary Black artists have a found a variety of ways to display the power attributed to African objects, engage them as a means to criticise their acquisition by, and display in, the West or explore the many nuances issuing from the intertwining of both. The vexed inheritance of past practice, such as in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, has been made clearer through a particular object ontology. The use of authentic and replica sculptures and masks from a number of African nations makes this more tangible. Beholding an actual artefact taken out of a familiar context to perform anew is productively unsettling, which is a condition of the reception of found object art in general. The first context of these objects for different groups – either the sacredness of their original function by their makers and users or the Euro-American colonial possession, appropriation and display – is always near the surface. For some contemporary artists, the spiritual power embodied in these works endures and can be rekindled; for others, it is enough to lay claim to the possibility of ancestral connectedness, to remind viewers of belonging. As Hammons stated, 'you have to go back to what we were before you go forward to what we want to be [...] I am here to remind us what the fuck we came from'.[55]

Acknowledgments
I wish to thank my colleague at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Delinda Collier, a historian of contemporary African art, for her invaluable insights and suggestions.

Footnotes

1. J.A. Gonzales: *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, Cambridge 2008, p.78.
2. See L. Wainwright: 'The decorative arts as found object: converging domains for contemporary sculpture', in I. Hart and C. Jones, eds: *Sculpture and the Decorative in Britain and Europe*, London 2020, pp.241–68, doi.org/10.5040/9781501341281.0015. It is now commonly understood that while the history of found object art may have begun with a kind of 'finding', as in Surrealism, moving forwards the practice also includes purchasing and selecting.
3. The present author has also found examples of African art as found objects by such artists as the South African Kendell Geers and Michael MacGarry; Pascale Marthine Tayou from Camaroon; the Nigerian artist Niyi Olaguunju; and Marcel Pinas from Suriname. Although it is another fascinating approach to the issue, this article's purview is the use of African objects by American artists.
4. M.B. Visona, R. Poynor and H.M. Cole: *A History of Art in Africa*, New Jersey 2008, p.412.
5. That Wilson might be ignoring the cultural context of the piece makes him vulnerable to the same objections Thomas McEvilley launched in his retort to the exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), in 1984–85, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which was curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe. Although a number of the artists in this study fall into the same category, their positionality as Black artists critiquing the display strategies of African art or reclaiming ancestral legacy is entirely different from the facile comparisons made by Rubin and Varnedoe. See W. Rubin, ed.: exh. cat. *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1984–85.
6. As a white American woman, the present author's position in narrating this story is different than those of the artists discussed. The author's analysis relies on years of scholarly work on the found object and the history of modern and American art. Her interest in these practices is one that examines how found objects offer an exemplary tool for understanding new kinds of cultural interactions.
7. Joshua Cohen points out that Norman Lewis's mask is a Guro mask, intended to be worn by a woman, from Côte d'Ivoire. Lewis made five portraits after objects from the landmark exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1935. See J. Cohen: *The 'Black Art' Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism Across Continents*, Oakland 2020, p.121.
8. David Driskell, in conversation with the present author, 30th November 2019.
9. For a fuller discussion of the role of African art in African American visual expressions, see T. Wofford: 'Africa as muse: the visualization of diaspora in African American Art, 1950–1980', unpublished PhD thesis (University of California Los Angeles, 2011); and Cohen, *op. cit.* (note 7).
10. David Driskell made this assertion concerning their sacredness, *op. cit.* (note 8).
11. This moment also corresponded with the increased availability of such objects, as the tourist market for African artefacts – real and fake – became more prolific in the United States in the 1980s. African objects became more visible as collectibles in the many makeshift stalls on the streets of New York beginning in the 1980s.

12. See V.Y. Mudimbe: *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington IN 1994.

13. 'Afrotrope' is a neologism conceived by Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson. See L. Dickerman, D. Joselit and M. Nixon: 'Afrotropes: a conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson', *October* 162 (fall 2017), pp.3–18, doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00306.
14. For a recent treatment of this subject, see Cohen, *op. cit.* (note 7).
15. See C. Thompson: 'Slaves to sculptures: a response to Patricia Penn Hilden', *The Drama Review* 44, no.3 (autumn 2000), pp.37–50; M. Wallace: 'The prison house of culture: why African art? Why the Guggenheim? Why now?', in *idem*: *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*, Durham and London 2004, pp.460–73; H. Copeland: *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*, Chicago 2013; R. Burmeister, M. Oberhofer and E.T. Francini, eds: *Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other*, Zurich 2016; S.P. Blier: *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece*, Durham 2019; and Cohen, *op. cit.* (note 7).
16. Hamza Walker, in conversation with the present author, September 2019.
17. Palmer Hyden, quoted from Cohen, *op. cit.* (note 7), p.120.
18. Wofford, *op. cit.* (note 9), p.65.
19. *Ibid*, p.201.
20. H. Copeland: 'Fred Wilson and the rhetoric of redress', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 15), p.1.
21. A plethora of artists utilising images of traditional African art began to appear, from John Edmonds, Xaviera Simmons and Rotimi Fani-Kayode's photographs to Rashaad Newsome, Wangechi Mutu and Rashid Johnson's collages, to name only a few.
22. Driskell, *op. cit.* (note 8).
23. See Rubin, *op. cit.* (note 5). Another significant but often overlooked moment in the history of African art's impact on modern art also occurred at MoMA twenty years earlier, in 1961, in the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* curated by William Seitz. In the opening room, the purveyors of this radical new tendency of assembling 'natural or manufactured materials' – John Chamberlain, Robert Rauschenberg and Lee Bontecou – were joined by a single African *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*), a two-headed dog with a cloak of perforating nails. Seitz's isolated African example boldly suggested a non-Western origin for using found material in this early survey of found object art. In fact, it is likely that such African examples of using found materials played a decisive role in Picasso's burgeoning experiments with anti-art materials. The Black artists who use African masks as found objects, a medium traditionally understood to have been developed by Picasso, Duchamp and others, have in fact returned to their own roots, when one accepts that this practice is African in origin.
24. Both the artist Clifford Owens and the curator Hamza Walker discussed the critical response to this show by African American artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Clifford Owens, in conversation with the present author, 29th October 2019; and Walker, *op. cit.* (note 16).
25. Wilson is also responding to Varnedoe's other MoMA show from 1990. See K. Varnedoe and A. Gopnik: exh. cat. *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1990.
26. Fred Wilson, quoted from I. Karp and F. Wilson: 'Constructing the spectacle of culture in museums', in R. Greenberg, B.W. Ferguson and S. Nairne, eds: *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London and New York 1996, pp.251–66, at p.253.
27. Copeland, *op. cit.* (note 15), p.35.
28. Wallace, *op. cit.* (note 15), p.462.
29. Jefferson Pinder, in conversation with the present author, 22nd October 2019.

30. African masks and figures were also included in Theaster Gates's *Amalgam* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2019.
31. Archive of Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago, Theaster Gates, quoted from unpublished interview with Gan Uyeda, on occasion of the exhibition *Theaster Gates: Heavy Sketches* in 2016.
32. Matthew Angelo Harrison, in conversation with the present author, 24th October 2019.
33. *Ibid.*
34. David Hammons, quoted from K. Jones: 'David Hammons', *REALLIFE Magazine* 16 (autumn 1986), p.4; see also D. Bey: 'In the spirit of "Minkisi": the art of David Hammons', *Third Text* 27 (summer 1994), pp.45–54, esp. p.46, doi.org/10.1080/09528829408576487.
35. Hammons's frequent use of African masks and figures might have been stimulated by seeing fellow street vendors' displays of African art knockoffs in New York, when he was selling his multiple snowballs in *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983) on the sidewalk nearby. The snowballs laid out on colourful rugs were coy references to the other ethnic pop-up stalls on the street. In 1980 Hammons created a window installation at the New Museum, New York, called *Rented Earth*, where he placed African masks and staffs alongside a child's toy television set, a ladder, platform shoes, old newspapers, broken liquor bottles and other detritus. See C. Ricky: 'David Hammons: The New Museum window', *Artforum* (October 1980), p.80. What some called an installation of 'historical contradictions' within a kind of 'archeological dig', *Rented Earth* documents Hammons's interest in recuperating African materials as part of a quest to lay claim to African legacy in his exploration of Black identity.
36. K.A. Appiah *et al.*: exh. cat. *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, New York (Guggenheim) 1996. According to the Hauser & Wirth website, 'Hammons has utilized mass-produced Africana since the late 1970s, acquiring masks and statuettes from street vendors and later from online retailers. These are subsequently included in his sculpture, visible in the multifaceted combination of 'Untitled' (1996)', available at www.hauserwirth.com/viewing-room/david-hammons, accessed 15th May 2024.
37. R.F. Thompson: *Flash of the Spirit*, New York 1984, p.118.
38. Kellie Jones also calls the work a *nkisi*, claiming the many masks with a mirror render it a 'single, multinational nkisi'. See K. Jones: 'Good mirrors ain't cheap', in R. Mnuchin and S. Rajaratnam: *David Hammons: Five Decades*, New York 2016, pp.15–28, at p.22.
39. Bey, *op. cit.* (note 34), p.48.
40. David Hammons, quoted from *ibid.*
41. The Hauser & Wirth show had no wall labels or catalogue; instead, there was only a press release composed of scribbled lines and a dedication to the jazz legend Ornette Coleman.
42. S. Vogel: 'Introduction', in *idem*, ed.: exh. cat. *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, New York (Center for African Art) 1988, pp.11–17, at p.11.
43. A. Rubin: 'Accumulation: power and display in African sculpture', *Artforum* 13, no.9 (May 1975), pp.35–47.
44. Nari Ward, in conversation with the present author, 5th September 2019.
45. *Ibid*.
46. Sanford Biggers, in conversation with the present author, 5th September 2019.
47. *Ibid*.
48. Biggers repeated this exact arrangement in a more recent work titled *Still* (2020), which connects a Yoruba sculpture to a self-portrait.
49. 'I don't know much about the objects. But they draw you in, they're evocative because of their possible sacredness', Sanford Biggers, *op. cit.* (note 46).
50. *Ibid*.

51. Cauleen Smith's example here underscores the lack of Black women artists using African masks and figures as found objects. Betye Saar is the other exception, along with the very recent work of vanessa german and Sheree Hovsepian. While this article aims to document a significant artistic tendency that has surfaced recently, the issue of gender in this polemic is unfortunately outside of its scope.
52. A similar installation, called *Give It or Leave It*, was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, in 2018.
53. Exhibition booklet for *Cauleen Smith: We Already Have What We Need* at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, 26th May 2019–15th March 2020, available at massmoca.org/event/cauleen-smith, accessed 7th June 2024.
54. Cauleen Smith, in conversation with the present author, 20th December 2019.
55. David Hammons, quoted from K. Thompson: 'Hammons' harem equation: four shots of memory, three shots of avant-garde', *Parkett* 31 (March 1992), pp.20–25, at p.21.