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Thesis Exhibition Proposal

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**Face. Off. Faceoff:**

### **Mapping African Representations in Western Art Museums**

In the Western world, curiosity cabinets and natural history museums first presented African objects as cultural artifacts aimed to intrigue and educate viewers about distant, exotic lands. Later, art museums reclassified African objects as art.<sup>1</sup> Despite this theoretical shift, there are still permanent African art collections which continue to conform to the anthropological models of display previously established. Curators attempt to counter the problematic representations present in these key modes of display, however none have fully remedied the challenges that accompany exhibiting another's cultural objects. Through a segmented show, with one side of the gallery showcasing an artistic display and the other side of the same gallery presenting an ethnographic display, my thesis exhibition will focus a critical lens on the perpetuation of colonized display techniques of African cultures as well as its impact on contemporary museum audiences and, more broadly, American cultural attitudes towards non-Western cultures.

There is ample scholarship on museum display theories and cultural representations. Much of this scholarship reflects on the effectiveness of past exhibitions to better inform future curatorial practices. As Michael Baxandall makes evident, every curator should consider theories of display, viewer

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Danto et al, *Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collection*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Arthur C. Danto (New York: Center for African Art, 1988), 12-14.

interaction, and education when it comes to constructing any exhibition.<sup>2</sup> These tools and practices often remain hidden from viewers as they navigate the carefully organized and constructed object displays. In the past few decades curators and museums have brought transparency into exhibitions, divulging where collections come from, how curators choose objects to display and where educational information originates. These elements of curatorial practice reveal the power our culture and institutions hold in designing the perceived identities of the collectors, cultures, artists and objects represented within art museums.

A number of temporary exhibitions highlight African art and artifact collections, but none are as relevant to my exhibition as *Art/artifact*. Curated by Susan Vogel, this show traveled extensively to nine different Canadian and North American art and natural history museums from 1988 through 1989. This exhibition concentrated on the display of African objects, challenging viewers to question whether these works should be classified as art or artifacts.<sup>3</sup> The show was organized into four different displays that together underline the history of western collecting, exhibiting and viewing of African art.<sup>4</sup> I plan a similar exhibition using African objects displayed in a formal art focused presentation contrasted with a typological ethnographic mode of exposition within the same gallery space. In contrast I will turn a critical lens on the ways in which conventional display tactics, still pervasive within the framing of many art museums' permanent collections, continue to perpetuate stereotypical notions of Africa as a "Dark Continent."<sup>5</sup> These notions create particular attitudes towards African objects and their makers propagating perceived social hierarchies that place the Western world ahead of all others.

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 33-41.

<sup>3</sup> Danto et al, *Art/artifact*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Karp and Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures*, 195-197.

<sup>5</sup> Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009).

While *Art/artifact* delved into the perceptions certain object presentations can create, the accompanying catalogue provided essays emphasizing the historically complicated western categorizations of African objects as art and artifacts, the interconnected practices and intentions of anthropologists, ethnographers and art historians in relation to the arts and artifacts of Africa as well as the histories of the collections from which the exhibition was created.<sup>6</sup> The interplay between *Art/artifact's* displays and the catalogue essays continued the debate regarding the categorization and presentation of African objects within museum settings and the histories from which these objects came. However, the essays fail to consider the effects these curatorial decisions might have on viewers beyond the museum walls. Nevertheless, one review of *Art/artifact* published at the end of the catalogue, "Bring 'Em Back Alive," by Kim Levine of *The Village Voice*, challenges audiences to confront our collective "barbaric preconceptions, savage distortions, and ignorant biases."<sup>7</sup> I plan to further Levine's realization and reckoning through a self-reflection of how my social economic and racial backgrounds create biases and prejudices within my curatorial decisions. I will make these reflections evident in my object labels and catalogue in the hopes that viewers will also take a moment to self-reflect and consider how their own histories implicate their interpretations of the objects, makers and cultures presented to them.

Another influential exhibition, *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*, debuted in 2002 at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). The transparent curation of the show by Pam McClusky aimed to inform visitors of how the objects on display came into the museum's collection. In the catalogue, McClusky made apparent the objects' histories, not often explained to audiences. McClusky used the extensive notes of the key SAM African collections contributor, Katherine White, to trace where objects

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<sup>6</sup> Danto et al, *Art/artifact*, 11-40, 97-111, 153-160, 198-212.

<sup>7</sup> Danto et al, *Art/artifact*, 204-205.

in the show originated and how they came into the museum's collection.<sup>8</sup> Following this introduction twelve case histories expand the interpretations of African objects and their original cultural displays. These descriptions incorporate primary sources from proverbs, epics, songs and film to add layers to the collector's personal experience of acquiring the African objects while interweaving conflicting views about the same objects to further contextualize the artworks on view.<sup>9</sup> This mode of presentation created a multifaceted exhibition which strove to bring the objects into the present, offering pertinent information about the histories of the objects, makers and cultures as well as their present standings in the world which provides an insight into the future of the objects, artists and cultures as well. This is an example I wish to emulate in my exhibition as I critique the display stagnation of too many permanent African art collections.

To analyze the effects of different display techniques and theories, I will primarily utilize the rich Emile H. Mathis traditional African collection housed by the UWM Emile H. Mathis Art Gallery. These objects will vary from our unique Horse Skull Reliquary, to an assortment of knives, an array of figures, and masks. Most of these traditional artworks will have a counterpart on each side of the gallery within the contrasting ethnographic and artistic presentations to create a basis for comparison between each display technique. This comparison will allow me to differentiate elements of each technique in reference to African art, making the divergences more apparent to viewers as they interact with my exhibition and encounter such presentation methods in other institutions. The inclusion of ancient Egyptian art from the Wright Museum of Art and contemporary African art from the Chazen Museum in the artistic display will allow me to juxtapose the anthropological and artistic displays by broadening the scope of what is typically included in traditional African

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<sup>8</sup> Pamela McClusky, Robert Farris Thompson and Seattle Art Museum, *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke Back* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2002), 13-15.

<sup>9</sup> McClusky, Thompson and Seattle Art Museum, *Art from Africa*, 61-276.

art exhibitions. This will also reinforce the extensive artistic timeline (from ancient to contemporary) that I hope to capture in my show. The exhibition will foster a broader understanding of the constructed intentions behind art exhibitions through my application of dual ethnographic and artistic display techniques within a singular gallery. This calls to attention the powerful effects art museums have on shaping the perceptions of not only museum goers, but the greater cultural attitudes of the western world. Consequently, I appeal for more transparency within art museums and the mediated representations of their displays, in particular of Africa, African art and non-Western cultures to allow for a more analytical viewing of museum objects.

One side of the exhibition will feature display techniques borrowed from contemporary art museums. There will be fewer objects, with enough space for visitors to contemplate each piece individually. Works will span from ancient Egypt to contemporary South Africa. The labels and wall text will mimic the transparency achieved by the SAM exhibition in 2002.<sup>10</sup> The intent of this first area is to alter the expectations of the visitor through the selection of objects, the placement of objects and the type of information included on the labels and wall texts.<sup>11</sup> This will then set a contrast with the alternate ethnographical presentation on the opposite side of the gallery. Here, visitors will be confronted with specimen-like groupings of objects from African cultures, much like natural history, ethnographic and anthropologic museums historically have done.<sup>12</sup> I will develop the information accompanying these objects with a tone of authority when cultivating contextual interpretations meant to instruct museum goers of the cultures whence the objects came. The two sides of the gallery will be clearly delineated with African house doors, shrine house doors and granary doors. Other physical mechanisms such as floorplan, label material and possibly wall color will further divide the opposing

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<sup>10</sup> McClusky, Thompson and Seattle Art Museum, *Art from Africa*.

<sup>11</sup> Karp and Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures*, 42-56.

<sup>12</sup> Karp and Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures*, 195-197.

sides of the gallery. I will present each display technique and my intentions transparently through the use of a reflective catalogue and wall texts as well as a thoughtful gallery floorplan in order to make the greater cultural effects of each display apparent to viewers.

Ultimately, in order for this exhibition to succeed, I will present the show in acknowledgement of how my social economic and racial backgrounds create biases and prejudices within my curatorial decisions. In being open, critical and honest I hope to develop an awareness of viewers' own viewpoints, which in turn create the foundation of the American cultural attitudes pertaining to non-Western art as it is presented in our art museums. To capture these attitudes, I will develop a survey for viewers to document how they responded to different display elements on each side of the exhibition. Upon collection of these surveys I will conclude my thesis with my findings. Whether this survey proves fruitful or not, I aim to make visitors more aware and critical of their surroundings in museums, acknowledging both how and what they learn continues with them into a world beyond the walls of the art museum.

It is through my conscientious selection of objects, their placement and overall presentation combined with the consideration of the ways in which audiences encounter and interact with these objects that this exhibition finds its strength and success. The side by side comparison of an artistic presentation and ethnographical arrangement will encourage viewers to partake in a more critical consumption of African objects and accompanying information. This in turn will provoke a reflective examination of our personal and cultural perceptions as mediated and informed by our cultural institutions.



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