

NINE

*“Magic, or as we usually say, Art”
A framework for comparing European
and African art*

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between words and images in the three categories “art,” “African art,” and *minkisi*. The last of these is a class of objects produced by the Bakongo of western Congo and usually referred to as “fetishes;” the preferred term in recent catalogues is “power objects.” I will pay particular attention to a class of *minkisi* called *minkondi* which includes wooden figures, full of nails and other hardware, commonly called “nail fetishes.” I intend to begin with art, make my way to African art, and end with *minkisi*.

My overriding theoretical concern, as an anthropologist, is to compare institutions interculturally, using a consistent perspective. The anthropology of art has generally failed to do this.

THE OBJECT OF THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

The anthropology of art is paradoxical in that it restricts itself to the art of “primitive” societies, from which, however, it can be argued that art is in fact generally absent (Mudimbe 1986). On the other hand, both “our” art – that is, the art of “modern” society – and that which is usually called “oriental art” are excluded. In *The Anthropology of Art* (1991), Layton explicitly limits himself to primitive art but prefers to say that he is dealing with the art of “small-scale societies.” He does not explain or examine this category, which apparently includes dynastic Egypt. His usage is not exceptional, however.

Related to this paradoxical restriction is the problem of defining the material to be studied. None of the currently proposed definitions is

satisfactory. Layton says that the subject matter of the anthropology of art is usually defined in one of two contrasting ways: "One deals in terms of aesthetics, the other treats art as communication distinguished by a particularly apt use of images" (Layton 1991: 4). Neither approach, he says, is universally "applicable"; by this expression he apparently means that each kind of definition excludes some objects which on other grounds we feel bound to include. For example, Kalabari sculptures are not evaluated aesthetically by the Kalabari, but they are based on images. In the end Layton seeks to combine the two definitions, arguing that art shares general principles of communication with language, but also enhances both visual and verbal communication through the aesthetics of form (Layton 1991: 148).

All of the criteria deployed in anthropological definitions of art, including Layton's, are contradicted by the example of objects to be found in any museum of modern art. All the definitions also suffer from being ahistorical; they fail to allow for the fact that whole classes of objects that were once neither "art" nor "aesthetic" have become both. Neither "art" nor "primitive art" is a class of objects existing in the world, to be identified and circumscribed. Both are categories of our thought and practice; they are related as subcategories of a broader institutional set, and have evolved continuously as part of the history of the west (Danto 1981: 44).

"ART" AND "SYMBOLISM": THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

The two criteria that Layton identifies as having served anthropologists to identify art correspond closely to those that have been used to delimit the field of symbolism. The symbolic in anthropology, according to Sperber (1975: 1), has been defined negatively as either the mental minus the rational or the semiotic minus language. In either case, it is what remains after we have set aside something we feel we know and understand; the criteria are ethnocentric (Layton 1991: 132).

According to the criterion of aesthetic value, art is the fabricated minus the useful. It consists of useless products, or of aspects of products which are redundant to utility. What makes a Chinese bicycle seat art, or potentially art, is the fact that it includes design elements some other, equally useful bicycle seat does not. Agricultural implements and other tools of

bygone days become “antiques” whose aesthetic merit is roughly proportional to their present uselessness. A thirteenth-century Madonna only becomes a work of art when, for a particular public, it loses its efficacy as an object of devotion.¹

The alternative criterion is that of communication, that is, of an idea, a transforming metaphor, which the maker intended to have some effect on a recipient. Layton correctly emphasizes that we have to be sure there was an intention, and that the message we see is what was intended. By this criterion, our Chinese bicycle seat is not art. That is not a problem, but once again our definition is residual – the semiotic minus language – and raises the problem, why images and not words? What exactly is communicated by a work of art? Is art an efficient means of communication – that is, does the degree of elaboration of the work correspond to the simplicity or complexity of the message? Is there any regularity in the meanings assigned to given artworks?

These questions can perhaps be answered, but there is a yet more serious problem. A semiotic view of art implies a distinction between the signifier and the thing signified, in fact a distance between the two. Freedberg (1989) challenges this understanding of images with respect not only to exotic arts but to our own. In a wide range of instances, including a Nupe mask, medieval reliquaries, sculptured figures of saints, and paintings of the nude, he shows that images do have power and that this power is the result of perceived identity between the signifier and the signified. The mask as danced is terrifying because it is the spirit it represents. The statue of the Virgin that answers your prayer is not equivalent to another statue of the same Mother of God in the next parish, and it will punish you for giving thanks at the wrong shrine. The nude in the painting in your bedroom may no longer cause you to conceive beautiful children, as she did in centuries past, but she still arouses the same sort of physical reactions as does the nude of real life. In all these instances, the “artistic” features of the painting or sculpture are intrinsic to its usefulness.

Freedberg’s most radical argument is that most of art theory is a response to fear of the power of images; it is a set of ideological devices for denying and neutralizing their power, a form of iconoclasm. The idea of the virtual space of the art object, isolated from real space by its frame or its base, is one of these devices, whose antecedents Freedberg finds in the iconoclastic arguments of the church fathers.

For the same reason, according to Freedberg, modern art theory attempts to strip the image of all narrative reference, saying that it does not signify anything, it is only itself. Fear of the power of the image explains Gombrich's insistence that representation depends on a context of convention; Jackson Pollock's belief that he could paint a picture devoid of reference to nature; Nelson Goodman's insistence that likeness is wholly symbolic; and Clement Greenberg's idea that flat is all (Freedberg 1989: 425). Formalism ("high critical talk") distracts attention from the possibility that a nude might be a pin-up by insisting, after Maurice Denis, that before being a nude it was an arrangement of form and color; historicism, the other prominent trend in art criticism, similarly evades recognition of the emotional impact of images by confining it in the past, among the painter's contemporaries (Freedberg 1989: 431).

Freedberg thus suggests that the theory of art, presupposing a discontinuity between the reality of the world and the reality of art, is, as Sperber says of the semiotic theory of symbol, a "native notion," a feature of the ideology of one particular society during a certain period of its history.

AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

Art is identified by a particular, institutionalized pattern of behavior. It is possible for something to be a work of art because we treat it in a particular way that contrasts with the behaviors appropriate to non-art. Art in this sense is, at least as a first approximation, a peculiarity of modern society and comes into existence, together with the other institutional features of modern society, in the seventeenth century.

For something to become a work of art, a labeling process must take place that requires three participants: an artist who produces an apt object, a client or public, and a critic or connoisseur who mediates between the artist and the public to assure them of the artness of the thing. If I make a painting, it is not sufficient for the painting to be "art" that I consider it so, nor even that you, my friend and neighbor, admire it and hang it on your wall; it must be certified as art by competent authority and exhibited in the institutionally appropriate place, a gallery or museum.² A pile of tires in front of a museum (Alan Kaprow's "Yard,"

1961) is to be viewed as art, indeed becomes art, whereas the same pile in a service station is not (Danto *et al.* 1988: 11).

Similar processes are required to identify a poet, a witch, or a murderer, none of whom is evidently so to the eye. The concept must exist and must be applied as a label to an apt individual by a standardized process. Application does not mean that the public unanimously endorses the identification; on the contrary, the natives may well dispute the result. The important point, anthropologically, is the content of the debate, which reveals the culturally defined categories that it presupposes. Among the Bakongo of western Congo it is possible to disagree whether a given individual is a chief or a witch; it has not been possible until recently to argue whether he is a poet or an artist, since these categories did not exist.

The prerequisite configuration for the existence of art – an apt object, a connoisseur, and a client – can be said to have come into existence in 1610, when the first book of connoisseurship was published, intended to advise a developing class of purchasers of art how to tell the difference between real art and fakes (Ginzburg 1980).³ Connoisseurship was first formulated and rationalized by Giovanni Morelli in the nineteenth century. Although his method, focusing on boilerplate elements in portraits, such as fingers and ears, was widely hailed as scientific, he himself insisted that ultimately no technique could substitute for what he called the diviner's gift, *Divinationsgabe*. It is characteristic of the ethnocentrism of anthropology that whereas the rationality of claims by African and other primitive diviners to be able to see what is not visible to the ordinary eye has long seemed to be a proper subject of investigation, the occult powers of our own diviners have been taken for granted. Magic has been regarded as a bizarre phenomenon, the artness of art has not. Yet the plain fact is that though the natives themselves are unable to identify a work of art with any certainty, they generally believe that artness is a real and consequential attribute of some objects which, once correctly identified, become quasi-sacred and absurdly expensive.

By art, in European context, I mean painting and sculpture, although a fuller account would have to take notice of architecture, ceramics, furniture, and other categories. Since Socrates, if not before, art has been contrasted with literature, not merely descriptively but normatively; that is, the two have been assigned contrasting functions and moral values. The

partisans of poetry, philosophy, and other authoritative forms of words have simultaneously deprecated art as able to show only surface realities, and deplored its seductive ability to lead the public astray.

The contradictions in this effort to contrast word and image, and to downgrade images, have been explored in a genuinely anthropological spirit by W. J. T. Mitchell (1986). Why is it, he asks, that the most knowledgeable and authoritative of native experts insist on the essential difference between word and image when no such contrast appears in practice? The contradiction suggests that we are dealing with an ideology whose real focus is elsewhere than art. Mitchell concludes that the real issue is that of defending authority (usually white and male) against the indiscipline of Others: images are denounced on the assumption that others (women, children, Catholics, natives) are in their power. "The rhetoric of iconoclasm is thus a rhetoric of exclusion and domination, a caricature of the other as one who is involved in irrational, obscene behavior from which (fortunately) we are exempt" (Mitchell 1986: 113).

Domestic debates about the nature of art thus implicitly serve to define our civilization in contrast to others. Art itself has an ambiguous position in this play of judgments: although as image it is inferior to, and subversive of, the authoritative word, it participates in the superiority of our civilization over those which by definition are incapable of art. Or perhaps we should say, are incapable of art criticism. William Rubin explains what he says is the generally low quality level of African tribal art partly by the absence of "a concept of Fine Arts supported by an ongoing critical tradition which, in turn, requires a written language" (Rubin 1984, I: 21). For good art to exist, according to Rubin, there must be present not only the artist and the public, but the critic, the word-smith.

The supposed contrast between words and images is salient in four fields of interest here. The first is the obvious one, the pejorative devaluation of African idols, fetishes, fertility figures, and the like from the sixteenth century through the heyday of imperialism to the present. The second is the progressive dissociation effected between word and image in the main trends of European art since about 1860. Third, the well-known tension between the art-curatorial approach to exotic artifacts, now regarded as art, and the ethnographic approach. Lastly, the inseparability of word and image in *minkisi*. In short, I am going to use the ques-

tion of the relation between words and images as a common perspective in which to consider European art, African art, and the relation between the two.

THE PASSAGE FROM IDOL TO ART

Layton specifically excludes fetishes from the visual representations that are art (1991: 6), although both the journal *African Arts* and major museums and auction houses think differently. Fetishes were certainly not art at the turn of the century; they have become so only in the last decade or two. In the introductory essays to a volume commemorating the 300th anniversary of the death of Olfert Dapper, it is argued that the force emanating from some African objects is so disturbing that in the sixteenth century it was thought necessary to burn them because they were too uncomfortably suggestive of the Devil; graven images subverted the authority of the Word of God. Only in the nineteenth century, after the founding of the Ethnological Society of Paris in 1832, did such forbidden objects attract the attention of the new science of ethnography, whose mission was to measure the progress of civilization from the primitive to the modern. Works formerly rejected as of the Devil began to be collected not as art but as evidence of Otherness. When some of them began to be thought of as art, they could only be included in private and museum collections after being stripped of some of their elements (Husson 1989).

Paul Gauguin interested himself in primitive objects and drew inspiration from them as early as 1889, when he visited a show of "native villages" at the Universal Exposition in Paris. There he acquired two typical Loango *minkisi*, which he proceeded to modify, cleaning them up and adding paint and other materials to suit his taste. On these "readymades aided," as Marcel Duchamp would have called them, he then inscribed his initials, "P.Go." (Fondation Dapper 1989: 10).

The archetype of such disturbing figures is the Kongo *nkisi* called *nkondi*, known in catalogues as nail fetish; to this day, *minkondi* (the plural) retain their power simultaneously to fascinate and to repel. In the 1960s, when I began to study Kongo culture, *minkondi* were rarely shown in coffee-table books of African art; nowadays they sometimes appear on the cover.⁴

The process by which an African object becomes art includes removing it from its context of origin to the accompaniment of varying sorts and degrees of violence. Besides the literal violence of theft, confiscation, and the like, we must include violence done to the object itself, which is often stripped of its accoutrements, varnished or even remodeled. In the past it has also usually been stripped of its name, identity, local significance, and function.

Such violence alone does not make the object art. In exchange for what it has lost, the African object is given a new context and a new identity. Its first lodging in Europe would have been an ethnographic museum, itself an invention of the middle of the nineteenth century, where its function was precisely to exemplify not art but the contrast between primitive cultures and those capable of producing art. It was renamed and re-identified as a fetish, fertility figure, or ancestor figure, and presented as a characteristic cultural product of a "tribe." Primitive art began life as failed art, and to a considerable extent continues to be so regarded.

The ethnographic museum invites us to look at objects in a particular way, and confers a certain character on them. In a thought-provoking exhibition, Susan Vogel explored the effect of the context and manner of display on the way we see objects (Danto *et al.* 1988). An African object, once labeled as, for example, "Kongo fetish," is likely to be displayed along with other examples of "Kongo culture," such as baskets, fish-traps, and raffia cloth, or else grouped with other "fetishes" from around the world. In each case, an implicit message is conveyed that has nothing intrinsically to do with the object itself but recalls and confirms elements of the museum-goer's world view. "Fetish" is an entirely European category, with its own history and cultural functions; a Kongo *nkisi* has in fact less in common with a Zuni fetish, for example, than with the relic of a saint in medieval Europe (Clifford 1988; Cushing 1883; Geary 1986; MacGaffey 1977; Pietz 1985, 1987).

The shaping of the viewer's experience continues with the manner in which the objects are displayed; traditionally, ethnographic materials were displayed in horizontal specimen cases, in clusters on the wall, or in a mock-up of a native habitat. The primary theme in such a display is the density of presentation and the relatedness of the objects, which are associated with an implicit anthropological narrative.

A framework for comparing European and African art

For an artifact to become art, a further stripping and re-identification is necessary, abandoning not only the indigenous context but also the anthropological narrative.

WORD AND CONTEXT IN MODERN ART

How we behave towards an object, thus how we see it, is conditioned by the context. In a gallery we put on our gallery eyes; to look at, and in other ways behave toward an object as though it were art does much to make it so. The American designer of the winning pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1990, whose art consists of truisms displayed in electronic illuminations, said of them that if they were shown in a public place they would be simply pronouncements.⁵ Much counter-cultural art in the 1970s invited us to look at natural objects with the same gallery eyes so that they too could be recognized as art even though they were located outside the gallery, often in a wilderness. This aesthetic program to enhance ordinary experience, which might be described as the "monosodium glutamate approach," has a precedent in the eighteenth-century notion of the "picturesque."

The archetype of all such objects that become art by the context of seeing is Duchamp's "Fountain," which is of course a urinal. The point of Duchamp's irony is that whereas a fountain, like a traditional work of art, projects something toward you, a urinal only achieves its function when you project something into it. The artness of an object is at least as much a matter of how we behave toward it as of the aptness of the object itself.

Our behavior is governed by the space in which we find ourselves. The art museum is a display space intended to favor a particular kind of seeing. The portico is impressive, the lighting is even, the wall-space bland, the floor uncluttered. As far as possible, each work has a space to itself, a kind of aesthetic privacy; one of the scandalous features of the Barnes Foundation's display of Impressionist paintings in Philadelphia is that they are densely clustered. So strong is the contribution of the space that more than one artist has put on a "show" consisting of an entirely blank, unfurnished, white-painted apartment. A critic confers art status on the experience, describing such a show as "articulating interior and exterior spaces, light and shadow," but admitting that "to a general public there is, indeed, nothing there."⁶ A performance by the artist Andrea

Fraser consisted of a parody of a museum tour; Fraser has also created a museum catalogue as an art work. Simon Linke's "October 1985" consists of fifteen paintings reproducing pages of the magazine *Artforum* that advertised art exhibitions.⁷

In spite of such raucous critiques from the fringe, the dominant theory of art in the twentieth century, particularly in America and particularly in New York, denies the importance of context altogether, insisting on the unmediated confrontation of the eye with the object. Viewers, we are told, must face the challenge of coming to terms with the work on their own. The object itself is supposed to make no reference to any other context of experience. Art ceases to be representational, and artists struggle to free themselves, as they put it, from tradition. The most obvious mark of such denial of context is the word "untitled" on the label of a work.

The pure vision of unmediated confrontation with the object is as much of an illusion, in fact, as the idea that a Quaker meeting, having done away with ritual, makes possible the spontaneous movement of the spirit. Non-ritual is itself a ritual. The word remains indispensable to the image, though now it is no longer found in the narrative reference of the work itself, the descriptive title, or the informative label; garrulous as ever, it is heard from the pages of reviews and magazines, and in the voice of the museum guide. "The emphasis on vision as the primary activity in the museum setting is evident from the reluctance many curators have to provide extended labels. Museum educators," writes Danielle Rice, herself curator of education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, "are often accused of trying to trivialize aesthetic experience by attempting to explain objects with words. The irony of people who devote their entire lives to studying art proposing that all one has to do to is look at art in order to understand it is not lost on museum critics" (Rice 1987: 2).

The best guide to the metapragmatic aspects of art, that is, the features of the gallery situation that make the experience of art possible, is the series of movements, from Duchamp to Minimalism, that make up anti-art. Anti-art has variously, but never simultaneously, denied the importance of permanence and noble materials, grand themes, the uniqueness of the object, technical skill, the distinction between people and objects, the museum as a display space, display at eye level, behavioral rules (don't touch, don't make noise, etc.), the individual artist, the art object itself,

and more besides. It has become a cliché, that the artist “seeks to provoke a dialogue about what is art,”⁸ “challenges the viewer to examine his or her expectations and perceptions,”⁹ “challenges the assumption that only precious materials and privileged surroundings are suitable for serious art,”¹⁰ or “questions the function of the gallery and the market in relation to the making, understanding and evaluation of art.”¹¹ None of these questions, no matter how often repeated, evokes an answer.

None of this has made anti-art any less art, because the definitive institutional features remain untouched; though the work be a “happening” in the street, it is still art when it is reported as such in the appropriate magazine.¹² The sculptor Richard Wentworth says: “I was glad to stop worrying about whether things looked like art, but I guess if you make things in studios and show them in a gallery they will tend to look like art, so you’ve lost anyway. You’re not going to find it anywhere else.”¹³

The paradox of the effort to separate narrative from visual experience is that the less a work refers in itself to some context of representation, the more the public depends on the gallery situation and the authority of the critic to tell them how art objects differ from physically identical non-art objects. As a minimum, we need a label, identifying the uniqueness of the work by giving the artist’s name, the date of the work, and the title, such as, “Untitled, No. 23.”

THE CURATOR AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER

Curators are, by definition, image people. Their business is to assemble and display objects in such a way that we see art, and see it to the full extent of its artness. The museum is the spatial context in which the seeing of what we might not otherwise see is to be encouraged. Ethnographers, on the other hand, add words to images. The intent of their words is to refer us to another context, that of the original production and use of the object, so that we might see something of what, say, the Bakongo saw, but which is in any case not empirically visible.

Though there need be no contradiction between these two programs, in practice the tension is considerable (Mitchell 1986: 156). To the extent that the curator cedes space to the ethnographer, his own authority is diminished, but there is more to the conflict than professional rivalry. To ranspose African objects into the category “African art” means fitting

them into the gallery context I have just described. This context is not just a standardized space but a set of institutional expectations of that which is art.

Africans began to acquire art in the 1950s, at the same time as they acquired national independence and history. The new breed of specialists in African art, part art historian and part ethnographer, worked hard to confer artness upon African objects not only by commenting upon their aesthetic qualities and their significance to indigenous users but by identifying in them at least some of the attributes of art. Sculpture in bronze, later in wood, qualified as art at an early stage and remains the preferred form; ancestors and fertility were recognized, however abusively, as suitably noble themes.

Since art is produced by an artist and should be individualized as a unique work identified by time and place, the critics strove to individuate the African artist and his product. Unlike ethnographic artifacts, art works were to be the product of an autonomous, creative individual, not of an anonymous, collective, and timeless culture. Biebuyck's *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (1969) announced the theme of spontaneity, in opposition to mere convention, as the guiding force of African art; the contributors to this volume proceeded to liberate the figure of the African artist from the block of tradition in which he had been imprisoned. The tribe as matrix of artistic production was abandoned in favor of the *atelier*, producing for a transcultural market. Indigenous aesthetic canons were elicited and efforts made, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish criteria that would distinguish real art from fakes (Ben-Amos 1989; Cornet 1975; Willett 1976). In sculptures, expressions of broad and noble human virtues were discerned, but indications of relatively sordid concerns and motives were overlooked (Siroto 1979). In galleries and glossy magazines, African objects received the art treatment. In short, if Africans were to have art, its institutional matrix and creative motivation had to be much like ours.

Reappropriation of artifact as art includes replacing old words with newer ones that reclassify the object in the viewer's cognitive and moral universe. An example is the recent preference for the term "power object" to replace the traditional "fetish." The aim is laudable, but how much text do we need? How much reorientation can be accomplished on a label? What does "power object" mean, anyway?

“Power” is vague enough and it correctly implies that a *nkisi* is supposed to do something. “Object,” however, is misleading, if our aim is to convey something of what the Bakongo saw in a *nkisi*. *Nkisi* is one of four categories that structure the religious practice of Kongo and much of Central Africa. The other three are ghost, ancestor and nature spirit. All four are personalities from the land of the dead. A *nkisi*, in its wooden figurine, cloth bundle or clay pot, is as much a personality as is an ancestor in his grave. The initiation of an expert (*nganga*) in the operation of a *nkisi* is very much like the inauguration of a chief dedicated to the ancestors of his clan; in fact, in the seventeenth century, chiefs were called *minkisi*. Once composed, the *nkisi* obliges people to behave toward it in a manner appropriate to chiefs; the great Loango *nkondi*, Mangaaka, was carried in a litter like a chief. On the other hand, chiefs were treated in some ways as though they were objects. The expression *koma nloko*, “to nail a curse,” describes invocations made either to a nail-fetish or to a chief. All persons, including both *minkisi* and ordinary people, consist of a body of some kind and an animating spirit, which can be transferred into another body by appropriate procedures (MacGaffey 1986). Nsemi Isaki wrote this account of *minkisi* in Kikongo in about 1915:

The *nkisi* has life; if it had not, how could it help and heal people? But the life of a *nkisi* is different from the life of people; it is such that one can damage its flesh, burn it, break it or throw it away, but it will not bleed or cry out. Yet the magicians think that a *nkisi* possesses life because when it heals a person it sucks illness out. In this sense they think a *nkisi* has inextinguishable life coming from a source. When a *nkisi* wishes to exert its strength it strikes people until some high priest supplicates it, his *nkisi*; then it will leave off. (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974: 35)

This way of thinking is very primitive, no doubt; surely, one of the basic assumptions of rational thinking is that people and objects must not be confused? A cross-culturally fair view of power objects requires us to recognize that in fact this assumption is not unambiguously evident in our own approach to art (MacGaffey 1990). Art objects are more than just objects. Critics have noted the quasi-religious status of art works as embodiments of spiritual value, and the place of the museum as successor to the municipal temple. Gallery behavior includes a sort of reverence that would not be appropriate in a hardware store, for example.

In order to allow art works their full artness, we believe we should behave towards them in a particular way – should enter, in fact, into a sort of social relationship with them. We speak of encountering art, of being in its presence, of allowing it to speak to us. A study of the views of art curators and other “people who ought to know, because of long training and professional involvement, what the aesthetic experience . . . was all about,” evoked such comments about the art object as that it was “telling you about itself,” “communicating,” or “giving you something.” Even when respondents did not explicitly refer to the process of communication as dialogue, most of them used expressions referring to speech; according to the authors of the report, the prevalence of this metaphorical language indicates that the process of communication was an important part of the aesthetic experience (Cziksentmihalyi and Robinson 1986). Communication, and especially speech, are capacities of people, not objects.

I am asking here what kind and quantity of words are suitable to add to an object displayed in a museum so that the viewer can begin to understand what the Bakongo saw in it. I suggest that the task calls not just for a description of the Kongo cultural context but, to be fair, for a similar description of the museum experience. I would like to explain that, anthropologically speaking, what the natives think about *minkisi* is no more and no less remarkable than what other natives think about art. In both instances, however, the native’s subjective experience, guided by cultural expectations and practices, is real and powerful. Doubting that I can fit all this on a label, I reluctantly side with the traditional curator: once an object has been appropriated as art, preferably by honest means, its original context and visual effect cannot be recovered and may be irrelevant.

WORDS AND VISUAL EFFECT IN *MINKISI*

I hold that culture is untranslatable, but I am not advocating simple relativism. To compare cultural elements, in their similarities and differences, is to demonstrate why translation is impossible but also furthers our understanding of them. So far I have suggested that the culturally guided encounter with art, like the encounter of Bakongo with *minkisi*, includes the conviction that the viewer has experienced an invisible spiritual presence, that he has seen something that is not there.¹⁴ In

both instances, cultural guidance consists partly of words, which are provided, in the case of art, by the label, the catalogue, and the critic. The more aesthetic theory insists on the disjunction between word and image, the more verbiage is necessary to make art of a given object.

In the case of *minkisi*, the relation between word and image is intrinsic, thus much more intimate than that between picture and label. Mitchell (1986) summarizes Nelson Goodman's comparison of pictures and texts in a way that illuminates *minkisi* (1976). Writing, according to Goodman, is a "disjunct" system, depending on a set of discrete symbols, such as the letters of the alphabet, which contrast in precise ways. A painting, on the other hand, is semantically "dense," meaning that no mark may be isolated as a unique, distinctive sign; the meaning of a mark (a spot of paint) depends on its relations with all other marks in a dense, continuous field.

In these terms, a *nkisi* is like a text rather than like a painting, a sculpture, or even a collage. As I have said, a *nkisi*, like a person, consists of a body of some kind, that is, a container, which is animated and endowed with forces by the medicines (*bilongo*) that are put in it. Some of these ingredients, such as grave-dirt, represent the incorporation of a personality from the land of the dead. Most of the rest serve to express metaphorically the powers of this particular *nkisi* and the uses to which these powers can be put. Many of the medicines are reduced by scraping (*teba*) to a powder which is incorporated with others in a sealed medicine-pack. In this condition they can no longer be seen, but their presence is announced, and their significance specified, by formulaic phrases recited as each one is prepared. A large proportion of the medicines in any *nkisi* are selected for purely linguistic reasons: the name of the plant, or whatever it is, recalls by a kind of pun the name of some desired quality. For example, *kazu* (kola nut), that the *nkisi* may "bite off" (*kazuwa*) witchcraft; *ngongo* (Calabar bean), that the witch may "become anxious" (*budika ngongo*) and desist; *nkiduku* (a fruit kernel), that one may be "protected" (*kidukwa*, from *kila*, "to paint lines," hence "to be magically protected").

Other medicines remain visible on or in the completed *nkisi*. Among them we should often include the container itself; if that container is an anthropomorphic figure it may show a series of metaphorically intended features describing either the characteristics of the *nkisi* or the effects it is supposed to have on those whom it attacks. *Nkisi* Lunkanka takes the form



9.1 Lunkanka.

of a monkey-faced, female anthropomorphic figure hung about with many things that I do not have space to discuss.¹⁵ The figure itself holds its hands to its head in the gesture *sa ntaala*, to resemble those who will display their grief over Lunkanka's victims. The figure is in a kneeling position to recall one of its taboos: "If the one carrying the *nkisi* should fall, he had to kneel down there on the ground and salute and say, 'I kneel in apology, I kneel like a goat [as though to a chief]. Relax your neck, do not stiffen it.'" Among Lunkanka's appendages is a fragment of the poison bark *nkasa*, meaning that someone who survived the poison ordeal and was found innocent of witchcraft, but whose accusers refused to pay compensation, fixed this in Lunkanka "so that the *nkisi* might seize them in their village where they plotted this against him" (Matunta, in MacGaffey 1991).

These snippets are only a sample of what one might write to explain what Bakongo saw in only one *nkisi*; too much already for a label, or even a catalogue. On the other hand, when I have shown pictures of a number of very different *minkondi* to groups of students, it has been interesting to hear how often their comments unwittingly recognize the metaphors intended by the makers of these *minkisi*. Noting the mass of hardware and other items attached to the figures, some said that they seemed to be weighted down or burdened – which is exactly right: *minkondi* are believed to inflict diseases of the chest such as pneumonia, which make you feel as though you were carrying a great load of firewood.¹⁶ It may therefore be sufficient to follow the curator's preferred approach and let the image speak for itself.

CONCLUSION

The intimacy of the relationship between word and image in the case of *minkisi* precludes any normative assertion about the superiority of one to the other, let alone a covert association between words and men, images and women, such as has been constitutive of the idea of art. This contrast with art illuminates the curator's problem and the source of our difficulties in cultural translation better than does any dubious distinction between primitive and modern, religious and secular, or context-bound and context-free. The existence of difficulties of this order does not mean that we should not struggle with them; nor is there any implication in what I have said that the process of making their artifacts into our

art is intrinsically improper. On the contrary: if Bakongo, in 1905, could appropriate a green glass wine bottle to make into a work of magic, *nkisi* Nkondi a Mungundu, it is only fitting that we should reciprocate by recognizing the result as art.¹⁷

A final *caveat*: I have oversimplified the contrast between European and Kongo art objects, implying that all Kongo objects which we regard as art were produced in ritual contexts, although that is not the case, and I have neglected the historical dimension. From about 1860 onward, the Bakongo of the coastal regions produced for sale to other Bakongo (including traders from inland) as well as to Europeans, a number of types of representational object that were simply remarkable, or intended to record noteworthy developments. Such objects thus implied a narrative context, but they did not incorporate words in the way that *minkisi* did. Obvious examples include the soapstone figures called *mintadi*, which were expensive objects acquired as things to marvel at. They often ended their Kongo careers as mementoes on graves, along with other remarkable belongings of the deceased, such as umbrellas, flintlock guns, and old gin bottles. If we need a comparison, such Kongo products may best be likened to American folk arts. Through no accident at all, the "discovery" of folk arts in Europe and America is contemporary with the discovery of African art in France.¹⁸ Like folk arts, these African objects have been transferred in recent decades to new careers as museum material; to maintain the distance between our folk and their folk, however, the African objects have been endowed, willy-nilly, with ritual contexts.¹⁹ So *mintadi* have been described as guardians of the village on behalf of the chief, although their lack of medicines renders them incapable of this function. Not all art is magic, nor is all magic art.

NOTES

My title borrows a phrase from Edmund Leach's *Social Anthropology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1982: 29.

- 1 "A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture; nor Cimabue's Madonna as a picture" (Malraux 1974: 13). The tension between the values of the religious devotee and those of the art-lover is patent, for example, when one visits the side-chapel in the cathedral at Ghent to see Van Eyck's "Adoration of the Lamb."
- 2 My criteria are also those of the United States government: sculpture is the

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- work of one who is “a graduate of a course in sculpture at a recognized school of art (free fine art, not industrial art), or [is] recognized by name in art circles as a professional sculptor by the acceptance of his/her works in public exhibitions limited to the free fine arts.” Cited in *African Arts* 11, 3 (1978: 5).
- 3 For the purposes of this paper, connoisseur, critic, and other experts are not distinguished. I also use “museum” and “gallery” interchangeably.
 - 4 A distinguished example of the *nkondi* called Mangaaka is reproduced as the frontispiece to Rubin 1984, I.
 - 5 Quoted in *Newsweek*, June 11, 1990.
 - 6 Yves Klein, “Le vide,” Paris, 1958; M. Asher, New York City, 1967 (Lippard 1984: 73).
 - 7 Lisson Gallery, London, April 1987. In fact only thirteen of the fifteen paintings were on display. The director of the gallery said the artist regards them as a set but there wasn’t room to hang them all, and that I was the first person to notice the deficiency.
 - 8 R. Artschwager, Whitney Museum, February 1988. Reviewed in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 18. He used to make furniture and now makes art that verges on furniture.
 - 9 W. Anastasi, “Displacement of plaster from wall to floor,” 1966. Philadelphia Museum of Art, placard.
 - 10 A. McCollum, Lisson Gallery, London, 1987. Review in *Time Out* (London), May 13, 1987.
 - 11 *Newsweek*, August 6, 1990, on Tyree Guyton, who piles abandoned houses with colorful junk.
 - 12 Richard Long’s “Windstones” (1985) consists of an announcement, set in attractive type in a Royal Academy catalogue (1987), that during a fifteen-day walk in Lappland he had turned 207 stones to point into the wind. The catalogue described this as “discreet yet decisive marking.”
 - 13 R. Wentworth, exhibition catalogue, Riverside Studios, London, April 1987.
 - 14 A real Rembrandt is an object of pilgrimage, a fake or imitation is no more than a curiosity, but experts are still arguing which is which.
 - 15 Folkens Museum, Stockholm; accession number 1954.1.2338; MacGaffey and Harris 1993: 77, Fig. 54.
 - 16 A *nkondi* in Folkens Museum (accession number 1919.1.538), consisted of a figure carrying a miniature load of wood, but the wood itself is now lost.
 - 17 Folkens Museum, accession number 1907.26.166. MacGaffey and Harris 1993: Fig. 54.
 - 18 Societies of Arts and Crafts were founded in Boston and Chicago in 1897.
 - 19 “The famous carved human figures of the Mangbetu have been described as ancestral effigies and as memorial figures for deceased rulers, and their bark boxes surmounted by carved heads have been assumed to hold sacred relics” (Schildkrout and Keim 1990a: 15–16).