

Playing to the Gallery: Masks, Masquerade and Museums

Masks pose vexing questions for museum curators, not only as an uncomfortable legacy of colonial collecting practices, but because they inevitably suggest an *absence*. This absence has been variously formulated by African art theorists; for Herbert Cole, arguing in 1969 that African art should be seen 'as a verb'ⁱ, the absent factor was the idea of process; for Robert Farris Thompson it was 'motion'ⁱⁱ. For Susan Vogel in 1991, the original context of a mask's reception was irretrievably lost in the museum,ⁱⁱⁱ and for Frederick John Lamp, 'involvement' was lacking, since, he argued, African performance 'must be experienced in the body to be fully understood'.^{iv} Hans Belting suggests that masks literally reify absence, 'expos[ing] a new and permanent (because not perishable) face by hiding another face whose absence is needed to create this new presence'.^v

These discussions have had a direct impact on museum practice, and in recent years, curators and artists have made various attempts to compensate for the perceived absences of mask display. Whilst discussions around both the politics of museum representation and masquerade practices in Africa continue to proliferate, very little critical attention has been devoted to the curatorial strategies which have recently emerged in response to these intersecting debates. This paper will examine the precepts and consequences of three attempts to redress the fragmentary nature of the museum mask-object, before considering alternative approaches to the notion of masquerade in the gallery. These enquiries lead us back to a central debate on the contemporary role of the museum, and the nature of the knowledge it promotes.

In a paper given at a 2003 conference devoted to problematising the absence of the non-visual senses from museum display, Jeffrey David Feldman introduced the notion of the 'lost body' in the museum. Following Clifford's conception of museums as 'contact zones',^{vi} Feldman proposed the museum object as a 'contact point', defined as the material result of the violent colonial process 'whereby the body enters into but is then eliminated from museum discourse'.^{vii} The remaining objects, he argues, bear witness to the colonial encounter in the form of indexical traces of absent bodies. These bodies are excluded from the museum by the 'cultural routine of looking at museum displays [which] separates the body from the object both pragmatically and conceptually'.^{viii} Feldman's observations are pertinent to this enquiry not only in their conception of the museum object as a nexus of political relationships, but because the process of

removing the body from the object is particularly suggestive in the context of masquerade practice.

Contesting the absence of the body from museum mask displays has been a central concern of Sokari Douglas Camp's practice since the late 1980s. Her exhibition *Play and Display: Steel Masquerades from Top to Toe*, shown at London's Museum of Mankind in 1995 and at the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1998-9, comprised thirteen welded steel sculptures depicting life-size Ekine and Gelede masqueraders in full costume. One of the stated aims for the series was to counter conventional systems of collecting and museum display which rendered masks as 'disembodied' fragments. 'There has never been any doubt in my mind as to how sculptures and masks... should be presented' she said in 1999, 'I always found it strange to be confronted in a museum with a bodiless mask... pinned to the wall. Where was the rest of it?'.^{ix} Camp likens the collecting of masks to a fetishistic interest in the Queen's shoes rather than her total regalia; in restoring the lost body and full costume to the masks, Camp instead makes claims for a sense of completeness. Sue Hubbard duly responds in the *Play and Display* catalogue, 'at last we are able to experience this vitality, the totality of masquerade... Sokari Douglas Camp has restored the mask to its rightful place within African ceremonial'.^x

Camp's masquerade sculptures have since become a staple supplement for museum mask displays, with examples in the holdings of the British Museum, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, the Horniman Museum, the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History, amongst others. Their appeal for curators is clear - not only are her works visually striking and technically assured, they apparently do much to resolve long-standing dilemmas of display. Installed alongside collections of *Gelede* and Kalabari masks, their presence in the museum gallery seems to undermine the stability of troublesome binaries such as traditional/contemporary, art/artefact, aesthetic/didactic and gallery/museum. Because Camp's masquerades are intended for gallery audiences rather than performance audiences, the dilemma of removing the object's context is apparently eased, and her Kalabari background ostensibly qualifies her with what Said terms the 'permission to narrate'^{xi}, partly relieving curators from the uncomfortable position of speaking for an 'other' (although the *Ekine* masquerade society, as a strictly male preserve, is in some ways 'other' for Camp; as a woman, she is not officially privy to their secrets, and in Buguma, she would not be allowed to perform, make masks or create such sculptures).

Camp's work transgresses boundaries on many levels, but the strategies of its use in museum galleries also leave certain questions unresolved. If, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, the museum object can be usefully thought of as a fragment, 'a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole',^{xiii} then by enlarging the boundaries of the object, do we come any closer to understanding the 'totality of masquerade' as Hubbard suggests, or are we simply left with larger fragments and a different absence?

If the aim of including Camp's work is didactic, to enhance an understanding of the specific collection and wider masquerade practices, then it must also be asked if this framing ultimately detracted from her professional status as a contemporary artist. Can the socially resonant distinctions between the gallery gaze and the museum gaze be confounded simply by moving objects around, by putting masks-for-galleries next to masks-for-performance? If Camp's work is included as evidence for the dynamism and mutability of Kalabari masquerade practice, as a means to historicise existing collections, then wouldn't this purpose be better served by examples of recent masquerade design? As it is, the received dichotomy between post-colonial artist and pre-colonial craftsman remains unchallenged, and the artist remains confined within identity-based frameworks. Camp's work has thus been caught in uneasy tension with ethnographic collections, neither fully contesting, nor fully complying with, the politics of their display. 'As an artist I felt there were more 'conversations' to be had in museums than in the gallery scenes of the eighties,' she explains,

The curators in ethnographic museums that I came across were hungry for change. Curators in galleries on the other hand seemed locked in the impressions that artists of the 1930s had about the rest of the world. So I was happy to work around people who were culturally aware. I never imagined I would get caught in anything being an artist, just as I did not really believe that museums and galleries were that different; they both show art. But this is a life lesson; you do not know a situation until you're in it. And I am a pioneer; this situation has never been before. (Camp (2008) pers. com)

Clearly the body's form is not the only factor absent from conventional mask displays; as Thompson and Cole suggest, the movement, temporality and drama of performance are also lost in the museum gallery. So should the museum become a place of performance? Does a living, human body complete the absence? In December 2006, the newly opened Musée du Quai Branly in Paris invited a group of Boni performers from Burkina Faso to perform a Bwaba mask over four nights, in the Claude Levi Strauss theatre. The event was part of an extended season which promised, in the words of programme advisor Alain Weber, 'to recreate a more intimate experience; one that corresponds to the kind of music played long ago in Oriental or Asian

Prince's salons, or in some village square in Africa or Latin America'^{xiii}. Harney observes a similar kind of salvage paradigm in Chirac's inaugurating remarks, in which he posits the museum's romantic essentialism as an antidote for the perceived threat of globalisation:

Now that the world is seeing the mixing of nations as never before in history, it was necessary to imagine an original place that could do justice to the diversity of cultures, a place that displays another view of the genius of the peoples and civilizations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.^{xiv}

Like many aspects of the museum's display strategies, the staging of masquerade performance as 'authentic experience' runs perilously close to a re-enactment of what Diana Taylor calls the 'theatricality of the colonial encounter'^{xv}, and leaves the event redolent of the nineteenth century European practice of exhibiting the bodies of colonised peoples. This parallel is particularly poignant given that the Musée du Quai Branly's accession of the Musée de l'Homme's collection came only four years after that museum's repatriation of Saartje Baartman's remains to South Africa. Both then and now, Taylor argues, exotic bodies are presented in museums as a 'truth' factor, to 'prove' the material facticity of an 'Other',^{xvi} and to underpin a fantasy of the supremacy and authority of the collecting, viewing subject. The drama of this enactment depends on the unidirectional gaze described by Foucault's panopticon;^{xvii} the act of observing establishes and supports a relationship of power.

When the living body is absent from a mask, beyond any agency thought to reside within the object itself, what is also removed is the possibility for what bell hooks terms the 'oppositional gaze'.^{xviii} Whatever other purposes they may serve, masks are usually made to be looked at, but in the context of performance, they are also for looking *through*; the performer looks back at the audience^{xix}. If, as bell hooks suggests, 'there is power in looking', this gaze might constitute an act of resistance, since 'even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency'^{xx}. Masks without bodies cannot literally return the gaze, but the Boni masqueraders were in a position to look back at the structures that framed them. So what possibilities of agency were available to them? No information is available about the process of commissioning the performers, but the encounter was, one would hope, more mutual and less coercive than the one which took Baartman to Paris. Yet by imagining the performers as uncontaminated by history or exchange, as authentically 'Other', the event's publicity effectively frustrated their performative agency as individuals, and foreclosed any opportunity for them to engage reflexively with the structures which framed them. The enacted performance was ultimately

prescribed by the museum, not the performers. Like Spivak's subaltern, they were thus left no space from which to 'speak'^{xxi}.

Couple in the Cage, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance as caged Amerindians from an fictitious undiscovered island, which toured museums and public spaces internationally from 1992, proposed a 'reverse ethnography' to challenge the panopticon nature of the museum gaze. Their intentions, to 'create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other'^{xxii} and to find a 'strategically effective way to examine the limits of the "happy multi-culturalism" that currently reigns in cultural institutions'^{xxiii}, could be fairly directed at the Musée du Quai Branly. The insertion of their bodies into museum discourse effected what Salah Hassan terms 'an act of counter-penetration, an assertion of one's own subjectivity in response to objectification',^{xxiv} and the project opened extensive critical debate about the legacy of human exhibition practices. In reviewing the performance however, Fusco remarked on an unexpected ambivalence in audience perceptions of the couple's performed agency and intention; a 'substantial portion'^{xxv} of the public took their fictional identities to be genuine, and some viewers even stepped in to argue benevolently on their behalf. If, despite the acerbic satirical intent of their performance, the received visual discourse of ethnography ultimately left these artists' bodies open for inscription in manners beyond their control, what hope was there for the Boni performers to articulate critique at the Musée du Quai Branly?

Restoring the mask's lost body to the museum, whether formally or literally, is clearly a strategy that is inadequate for either confronting the inequity of representation, or for communicating a profound understanding of particular performance practices. The 'Performance Gallery' at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery proposes an alternative approach in which the lost body is not restored, but *enacted* by the viewer. The display features three Bedu masks purchased by Karel Arnaut in the Bondoukou region of Cote d'Ivoire between 1992 and 1995. Arnaut was initiated into the Bedu cult as part of what he describes as 'a programme to enhance the interaction between myself as researcher and the Bedu mask users/makers by assuming different positions in the domain of Bedu masquerade'^{xxvi}. These positions are reconstituted for the museum's audience through the display's captions which suggest that 'from today, you have become part of the performance'^{xxvii}. Situating the viewer in the roles of a young initiate, a participant in the performance, and a carver, the captions finally invite the audience to place their faces *in* the masks, upon which a sound recording from a Bedu performance is activated.

The reversal of the Bedu mask for a viewing public is symptomatic of recent concerns to represent the phenomenology of lived experience in museum practice. These debates parallel wider technological developments which see consumers increasingly invited to engage with, and actively constitute, cultural activity. Nicolas Bourriard formulates these shifts as the production of ‘extras’ to participate in the next stage of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*:

the individual has shifted from a passive and purely repetitive status to the minimum activity dictated to him by market forces... we are summoned to turn into *extras* of the spectacle, having been regarded as its consumers^{xxviii}

In the context of masquerade display, the purpose of this participation demands scrutiny. What exactly is meant to be translated through this configuration of objects and technologies? Are we to believe that the act of viewing *through* the mask actually grants any kind of access to another lived experience? Even if it did, what would be the ultimate goal of appropriating this identity? Any intent to engender a notion of cross-cultural understanding is surely frustrated by the privileged, relativised perspective accorded to the viewer.

The reversed masks on display are said to be ‘souvenir’ masks, smaller than those intended for performance, yet the captions place the viewer in the role of the performer, and reveal secrets taught to young boys during their initiation with Bedu. The disclosure of such knowledge to a visiting public of uninitiated men, women and children seems in effect to contravene the conventions and secrecy of the Bedu society. The museum’s supporting material stresses that ‘the collection is the result of active collaboration and sometimes lively negotiation between the makers and the anthropologist’ and that ‘the makers were informed of the proposed destination of the objects’^{xxix}, but whether they were aware of the participatory nature of the display and the content of the labels is not clear. In any case, as James Clifford asks^{xxx}, what do the museum, curator, and audience which promote and consume this display, now *owe* the Bedu mask-makers? If the commodity peddled by the museum is not only knowledge and experience but *identity*, how can this possibly be valued in a relationship of exchange?

In her discussion of race as a visual technology, Jennifer González coined the term ‘identity tourism’. She was referring to *Human Race Machine*, a touring project established in 2002 by artist Nancy Burson, which scans images of participants’ faces, and digitally morphs them into different racial ‘types’. The project claimed to ‘allow us to move beyond differences and arrive

at sameness^{xxxii}, yet as González retorts, the *Human Race Machine*, much like the Bedu display, ultimately engenders a

‘non-reflective relationship that actually widens the gap between the other and the one who performs itself as the other in the medium of cyberspace... it may make the process of cross-racial identification appear plausible, but its artificiality does nothing to change how people live their lives or understand their historical condition’^{xxxii}

Both projects claim to engender empathy, yet rely on a fantasy of difference to do so. The difference in this case is no longer orchestrated in terms of Foucault’s panopticon gaze distancing the observer and the observed by visual means, it operates through a technology of embodiment and sensory immersion which effects an imagined colonisation of the ‘Other’s’ body and identity.

These cases reveal much about the current debates surrounding the post-colonial role and function of the museum, and about the political tensions of representation, but how much do they convey about the specific performance practices they address? Whether the absent body is depicted, appropriated or enacted, the lived experience of masquerade performance is inevitably untranslatable in a museum environment. In trying to complete the fragmentary nature of the mask, or compensate for perceived absences, these displays attempt to stage an authenticity which is irrevocably fictional. However, once the drive for authenticity is abandoned, possibilities emerge within the museum space for reflexive critique of the institution’s function, and for discussion of performance arts in Africa which extends beyond a paradigm of difference. The visual arts can play a fundamental role in these discourses. Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe have argued that conceptual art has a long history in Africa, and that ‘if any creative or critical strategy establishes a firm link between contemporary and classical African art, that strategy is conceptualism’.^{xxxiii} In that case, it may prove useful to examine masquerade in the context of other contemporary visual practices.

Artist-curator Fred Wilson is concerned in his work to observe ‘how the environment in which cultural production is placed affects the way the viewer feels about the artwork and the artist who used these things’.^{xxxiv} His 1991 installation *The Other Museum* featured a series of West African masks bound at the eyes and mouth with French and British flags. ‘I wrapped the masks because they’re sort of hostages to the museum’ he explained,

I like to bring history to the museum, because I feel that the aesthetic anaesthetises the historic and keeps this imperial view within the museum and continues the dislocation of what these objects are about.^{xxxv}

Wilson's work offers an informative approach to the mask in the museum by foregrounding its ongoing history, its 'social life',^{xxxvi} in Appadurai's terms. Rather than seeking to restore an original 'meaning', this approach recognises that the objects are subject to continually shifting relationships and mechanisms of signification. In the context of the museum, the historical violence of these relationships is often obscured in favour of national narratives. Clifford formulates this in terms of Marx's commodity fetishism, such that, in the museum:

an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation... historical relations of power in the work of acquisition are occulted. The making of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate representation. The time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labour of its making.^{xxxvii}

Masks, as a category of objects, are particularly bound up in social relationships, not only as commodities, but as markers of identity, status, ownership, colonialism, performance, play, religion and many other things. As an artefact in a museum, a mask therefore sits at a nexus of diverse institutions with competing claims of representation and understanding. The mask-maker, the performer, their performed persona and its audience, the ethnographic collector, the curator and the museum's public constitute a complex web of historical relationships articulated around the mask as an object. By interrogating the shifting nature of these relationships, rather than obscuring them in favour of a salvage paradigm, Wilson's work brings a welcome transparency to the politics of displaying masks in museums.

The mixed media installations of Romuald Hazoumé also explore contemporary socio-economic relationships, and draw on the signifying potency of the mask form. His celebrated 1997 work *La Bouche du Roi*, recently acquired by the British Museum, features over three hundred masks made from jerry cans which once transported black-market petrol between Nigeria and Benin. The masks are arranged after the 1789 woodcut print of the slave ship *Brookes*, and each is given a name and a token such as a red tail feather from an African Gray Parrot (to enable clairvoyance), an *ibeji* figure (to honour lost 'spirit-doubles'), a string of beads, or a cowrie shell (referencing both Fâ divination and commercial exchange). Hazoumé's masks are not simply images, he animates them, like *bocio*, with a configuration of materials, positing them both as reincarnations of spirits lost to the transatlantic slave trade, and as reminders of workers caught

in contemporary systems of slavery today. Like Dan spirit masks, these masks are not for performance, but embodiments of metaphysical agency in their own right.

Hazoumé's practice is rooted in Fâ divination, but it is also fully engaged with international art discourses. However, as with many other artists working in Africa today, his reception in the West has been mostly characterised by a constrictive focus on his nationality and his choice of materials. The layout of the UK leg of the touring exhibition Africa Remix, and the UK press response to it, did much to constitute to a new public face for 'contemporary African art'. The exhibition grouped 'found-object' works by Hazoumé, El Anatsui, Dilomprizulike, Tito, António Ole, Gonçalo Mabunda and Allan de Souza together in the first two rooms, with video and digital work following in other parts of the gallery. This configuration had an impact on the press response, with Waldemar Januszczak suggesting in *The Times* that 'poverty supplies the textures... turning scraps into art is a pancontinental obsession',^{xxxviii} Robert Hanks in *The Independent* discerning a 'common thread [of] ...recycled materials',^{xxxix} and Jonathan Jones proposing in *The Guardian* that 'recycling of one kind or another is the dominant aesthetic in Africa Remix'.^{xl}

The notion of the artist as alchemist, or what Gell calls the 'occult technician',^{xli} is a fundamental validation of Western art institutions; it gives that once a material is taken up and processed by an artist, it is irrevocably transformed into something else. The use of the term 'recycled' in reference to African art roots focus on the mundane past life of the materials, and stymies any claims for this artistic alchemy or transformation. This not only diverts attention away from the conceptual qualities of the work, it throws the practitioner's status as an artist into question and bolsters stereotypes of African artists as impoverished 'outsiders'. The mask as a metaphor is pertinent here for the occulting effect of identity-based curating. It can only be hoped that the decision to award Hazoumé the prestigious Arnold Bode Prize at Documenta 12 in 2007 marks the beginning of a shift in this paradigm.

So, as John Picton reminds us, a mask can be many things, 'a word, of course, an idea and a metaphor, as well as an artefact, of European culture',^{xliii} but none of these things are necessarily useful for an understanding of performance practices in Africa. Many things, as Picton goes on to note, can serve a masking function in performance (darkness, doors, fabric, kazoos), many 'masquerade' performances take place without anything resembling a mask, and many things which resemble masks are not made to be worn on the face. Neither, he suggests, can we assume

that ‘putting on a mask necessarily transforms a person’s social identity. Nor is masking necessarily about secrecy.’^{xliii} The subjectivity and diversity of performance practice in Africa makes generalisation futile, but widening the scope of analysis beyond the mask object allows for a more serious consideration of the particularities of performance practices taking place in Africa today.

Tracey Rose’s installation *Ciao Bella*, shown at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2002, comprised a series of large scale Lambda print portraits of thirteen female characters, all played by Rose, and a three-channel film in which the cast enact a drama based on the Biblical Last Supper. The characters included Marie Antoinette (*MAQEIII*), pictured serving chocolate cake against an RDP housing settlement^{xliv}; the proper and matronly *Mami*, pictured in front of Rose’s Catholic girl’s school in Durban (she was one of the first classified ‘coloured’ girls to be admitted); a young, rosy-cheeked *Lolita* in the role of Judas; a drug-crazed *San Pedro* in fishnets and facepaint; Italian porn-star and MP *La Cicciolina*, pictured self-flagellating on the bonnet of the Rose’s Johannesburg art-dealer’s car; *Saartje Baartman*, who is hanged in the film before ascending to heaven only to be reincarnated as a labia in a jar; and *Bunny-nun*, wielding a machine-gun with which she eventually shoots down members of the cast.

Much of Rose’s work is deeply personal, and like Cindy Sherman, she plays with possibilities of self-transformation enabled by visual technologies. But *Ciao Bella* also makes complex inter-textual references to invoke wide-ranging social critique about gender, race, religion, politics and economic tensions. Whilst Rose’s interventions are clearly enmeshed in international art discourses, many of the socio-political concerns raised by *Ciao Bella* are incidentally paralleled in West African masquerade practices. Like many performers, Rose uses her body as the primary aesthetic field in addressing: gender stereotypes, sexuality and power relations (in *La Cicciolina* as in *Gẹ̀lẹ̀de* masquerades); coming of age (in *Lolita* as in *Sande* society masquerades); social injustice and the contestation of authority (in Marie Antoinette *MAQEII* as in Afikpo *Okumkpa* masquerades); religion and violence (in *Bunny-nun* as in Bakwele *Gon* masquerades); altered states of consciousness (in *San Pedro* as in rites of spirit possession); reincarnation and honouring of wronged ancestors (in *Saartje Baartman* as in Yoruba *Egúngún*); and liminal identity, as suggested by her shifts between black-face, white-face and natural skin.

My intention is not to suggest an alternative reading of Rose’s work, neither is it to make claims for any kind of pan-African aesthetic or sensibility; parallels could be drawn with performance in

any part of the world. It is to propose an approach to the representation of masquerade practice which looks beyond the mask and beyond paradigms of alterity and authenticity. When we transcend these frameworks, it soon becomes evident that masquerade performances are taking place all around us.

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Acknowledgements

Versions of this paper were presented at a 'Masked Performance in West Africa' Symposium at the University of East Anglia, Norwich in March 2005, and at the 32nd Association of Art Historians Conference at Leeds University in April 2006. Charles Gore, William Rea, Leon Wainwright and Roger Sansi-Roca gave useful comments on the paper, my warmest thanks to them, to Alexis Wolton, and to John Picton for suggesting the title and for his kindness.

Notes

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- ^{viii} *ibid*: 263.
- ^{ix} Camp, Sokari Douglas (1999) available at <http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/insights/camp-artist.html>
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