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## **Display, Restitution and World Art History: The Case of the 'Benin Bronzes'**

### **Introduction**

This article was originally given as a paper to the conference of the Association of Art Historians at Manchester Metropolitan University in April 2009, as part of the strand 'Art History and its Global Provinces'. I have retained its informal style in the present context. Despite its subtitle, the article is not 'about' the Benin bronze sculptures and plaques that were made in Benin City in West Africa between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. There is a specialist art historical literature on the royal art of Benin as well as an equally specialized challenge to the assumptions of that literature.<sup>1</sup> I am not a specialist in the art of Benin, or African art more generally. Instead, this paper emerges from a set of interests that are simultaneously more general and more local in character, concerning the relation of the Western canon of art to 'elsewhere' and to the display of art from 'elsewhere' in British museums.

### **Display**

As part of my university's official commitment to 'diversity', and also as a contribution to broadening the art history curriculum, an interdisciplinary study of the 'Benin bronzes' (more accurately they are cast brasses) was recently included in the Open University course 'The Arts Past and Present: An Introduction to the Humanities'. I was one of four authors. The material covered included, as well as the facture of the cast bronzes/brasses and related carved ivories from the same approximate period, historical trading relations between Europe and West Africa, the British invasion of the kingdom of Benin in 1897 and the complexities of the subsequent reception of the sculptures into Britain and Europe around the turn into the twentieth century. My own contribution discussed the cast sculptures and plaques in relation to the avant-garde discourse of primitivism, its subsequent eclipse and continuing present-day problems of reception in a period of globalization.<sup>2</sup>

Coincidentally, 2007 and 2008 also happened to be the occasion for the largest exhibition of the art of Benin yet assembled.<sup>3</sup> That travelling exhibition did not visit London, where the British Museum has one of the world's largest holdings of Benin art. It was, however, seen at three major European museums, the Völkerkunde museum in Vienna, the musée du Quai Branly in Paris and the Ethnologisches museum in Berlin. Its final destination was across the Atlantic at the Art Institute in Chicago. It did not, you will notice, travel to Nigeria. This is a point to which we shall return.

Although the British Museum (BM) was not on the itinerary of the 2007–8 exhibition, the BM's display of African cultural materials condenses many of the issues to be discussed here, and testifies to the fluid, not to say confusing situation obtaining in the exhibition of world arts. Parts of the BM display include anonymously made utilitarian objects arranged according to material in the manner of a traditional museum of anthropology. The Sainsbury-sponsored Africa Galleries, which opened in 2001,<sup>4</sup> are as a whole dedicated to the memory of the English sculptor Henry Moore, including a statement at the entrance by Moore himself on the expressive power of the formal distortions practised by African carvers; that is to say, a paradigmatically modernist reading of African art. Still other parts display pieces by individual contemporary artists, including Magdalene Odundo and El Anatsui. An installation by Sokari Douglas Camp overtly seeks to counter a formalist-modernist reading of masks on display nearby and to re-embed them in social practices of masquerade. The BM Benin display itself straddles all three modes. The well-known Queen Mother head and many other free-standing objects are conventionally displayed in glass cases. A selection of the unique two-dimensional plaques are, however, arranged in a grid format attached to vertical steel poles – a design which manages simultaneously to allude to the original presentation of the plaques on the pillars of the Oba's palace in Benin City and to connote a minimalist-grid cum contemporary-art installation in which the balance of display tilts decisively from the ethnographic to the aesthetic. Elsewhere contemporary popular-cultural textiles reference a range of issues from sports to politics to anti-Aids campaigns, and in so doing pose further challenges to entrenched art/craft, high/low distinctions. These local contradictions within the BM's Africa Galleries are part of a wider instability in the museum display of such work. It is, moreover, an instability with a history.

One of the most persistent difficulties attendant on the field of 'world art' – particularly pre-modern world art – and Western displays of it, concerns precisely the 'art' status of the work on show. This is not because of any doubts about estimation and ranking in the here and now (whether status X should or should not be conferred on object Y), but because of the history of the term itself.

As late as 1857 Ruskin could claim there was no 'pure and precious ancient art' in Asia, Africa or America, thereby centring the term 'art' on the European tradition. This is not to say that Ruskin thought that Islamic, Chinese and Indian civilizations lacked art as such (indeed he remarks elsewhere in the same lecture that 'nearly every great and intellectual race of the world' has produced an art particular to it).<sup>5</sup> But it places him in a tradition which systematically disparaged the products of such cultures relative to Europe; and indeed, in the case of other places such as Oceania, North America and Africa, he did actually consider them to be devoid of 'art'. Far from being exceptional, such a position was normative in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet that position had already undergone radical revision before the end of that century within the emerging avant-garde. There at least, attention quite suddenly shifted from the post-Renaissance academic tradition and its Antique predecessor, the centre ground of the

preceding 400 years of 'art', to the hitherto disparaged 'outside'. Initially, Japanese cultural products, especially prints, became thought of as 'art', on a par with if not superior to the erstwhile Western canon. Thus the Goncourt brothers wrote in their *Journal* in 1862 that: 'Art is not one, or rather there is no single art. Japanese art is as great as Greek art.'<sup>6</sup> And, most resoundingly, the hitherto disparaged products of Oceania and Africa moved from the category 'ethnographic artefact' to the new category 'primitive art'. In the early twentieth century the modernist idea of art became established as a universal category anchored in a notion of trans-cultural, transhistorical, 'significant form'. In Clive Bell's famous list of 1914 it could include the medieval stained glass windows of Chartres, a Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, a Chinese carpet, the dome of Sta Sophia, as well as a fourteenth-century fresco by Giotto and a then almost contemporary oil painting by Cézanne.<sup>7</sup>

Once modernism in its turn came to be regarded as a local tradition, the tradition of the West, 'art' remained a concept of global application, defined now, however, not in terms of its unity or its purity, its grounding in an essentialistically conceived 'form', but in terms of its endless difference: Indian art, African art, Inuit art, Aztec art, Ottoman art, Paleolithic art, as well as European art; not to mention contemporary globalized art tied to no particular regional tradition (or to many).

This development, beyond formalist modernism, represents as significant a shift as does the earlier one from narrative into form. It is far from being a simple case of accretion around a stable core, because, while in one sense the 'art' status of an open range of practices and products (bottle racks, beds and bodies *inter alia*) has come to be accepted as secure, that security is weakened by deeper uncertainty about the core concept itself. This is a dilemma whose familiarity does nothing to cancel its force: if anything, everything and nothing can count as 'art', what has happened to the grounds of value (use value and exchange value alike) on which the concept has been and continues to be predicated?

This has taken me far beyond the modest introduction I intended, and much in the foregoing is compressed and scarcely adequate to the complexity of the subject. But, in the present compass, all I am trying to establish is this: that, set against the grounding context of a discourse of artistic modernism over the last 150–200 years (its emergence, its establishment and its transformation), there have been three distinct paradigms under which 'non-Western' culture was received and displayed in the 'West'. I am using this problematic binary deliberately here. For what we know of binaries is that they privilege one term over the other, where the latter term is instantly inscribed as the lack of the former. The binary in play here is of course a large part of the point at issue: the 'non-Western' being 'received and displayed' in the 'West'. The implicit power relations within that sentence constitute the hidden seven-eighths of the iceberg of 'art' in modernity.

The first display paradigm was of the object regarded as anthropological artefact. The purpose here is to provide knowledge of exotic or alien ways of life. Such displays are constructed under the sign of 'science'. They are, or perhaps I should say, were, intended to communicate knowledge,

anthropological or ethnographic knowledge. As long as 'art' was identified with classical and post-Renaissance mimesis these kinds of thing were not regarded as art. Repulsive or fascinating, it makes no difference; skilful, ingenious, they may have been, startling examples of 'native' craft they may have been, but 'fine art' they were not.

The second display paradigm reflects a revolution. That system of values (and here I am repeating some of what I have already said), undergoes a significant transformation owing to the beliefs and practices of the avant-garde of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the words of Meyer Schapiro, 'what was once considered monstrous, now become pure form and pure expression'.<sup>8</sup> For the avant-garde it was precisely the products of the academic tradition that lost their virtue, becoming seen as compromised by their complicity in the wider values of bourgeois culture. For them, value migrates to marginalized, disregarded, subordinate practices of representation. These included, as well as the hinterlands of the canon itself, such as Dutch art, the register of the popular, notably prints such as those from Epinal, and later the press and advertising. Also numbered among these new sources of value were the representational practices of the rest of the world, including the colonies. For the avant-garde, the most significant of these, in more or less chronological order, were Japan, the South Pacific and Africa. Modernism constructs the category 'Primitive Art', determined principally by concepts of 'form' and 'expression', fuelling the core value of 'autonomy'. Resulting displays were organized under the sign of the aesthetic. Historical examples are multiple, the key period being the half century from Alfred Barr's pioneering MoMA exhibitions of the mid-1930s to the late, and hence controversial, instance of William Rubin's MoMA exhibition of 1984.<sup>9</sup> From more recent times, displays continuing that lineage albeit in modified form, might include the Pavilion des Sessions at the Louvre, with its 'one hundred works of exceptional quality';<sup>10</sup> in terms of the Benin bronzes, the 2007 Quai Branly display and the permanent display of the Benin plaques in the Africa Galleries at the BM.

Then a third display paradigm duly emerged, under the pressure of broader, world-historical forces, namely de-colonization and globalization, as well as more localized pressure. Increasingly, in the last quarter of the twentieth century the translation of the non-Western into the terms of a Western aesthetic under the universalizing rubrics of form and expression came under attack as part of the wider critical and art-historical move against the precepts of orthodox 'modernism' mounted by the so-called 'new art history'. In some respects this emergent third paradigm marks the return of the repressed anthropological moment, as it were, at a higher level. Here the re-emergence of social-ethnographic considerations marks not a refusal to confer the elevated status of art on the artefacts of exotic cultures, but a challenge to the modernist autonomy claim in the name of a putatively expanded field of art. From this perspective, the work of art is now regarded less as an object of attention in its own right, as if it were an end in itself, and more as a means of engaging with the culture of the Other – other *people*. These displays are constructed under the sign of difference, under the sign of identity

politics, wherein it is not aesthetic autonomy that is held to be the governing virtue, but cultural diversity and the relation of art to ways of life.

In terms of the travelling Benin exhibition of 2007–8 these display paradigms were differentially registered in Vienna, Berlin and Paris. In Vienna a facsimile of the wall of the royal palace in Benin City was constructed to frame the entrance to the otherwise conventional display of objects, thus rooting the displays in a specific history; a similar thing was done with a facsimile altar, again siting the objects in a simulacrum of their original meaning-conferring locale. The final rooms of the Vienna installation and the entrance of the Berlin installation adopted the opposite tactic: of relating the displays of historical objects to a contemporary conjuncture. In the Vienna display, the historical works were related to contemporary Nigerian popular culture – fabrics, calendars and late twentieth-century bronzes – some replicating traditional motifs, some inaugurating new ones. In the Berlin display, the history was connected to the contemporary Nigerian diaspora in Europe, in the form of life-size photographs and accompanying interviews with Edo people resident in Berlin. Both Vienna and Berlin differed significantly from Paris, which had none of this. There the relief plaques in particular were separated from the artefacts, individually lit and in effect displayed as two-dimensional works of art, like paintings (or, indeed, like a postmodernist Parthenon frieze).

In the terms I have established, then, the Paris display represented a combination of the first and second paradigms of display (historical artefacts separated out from works of art, the latter presented as aesthetic objects in their own right, and a *de facto* exclusion of contextualizing objects or information which was regarded as detracting from the impact of the works of art, as art). The Vienna and Berlin installations in their different ways represented a mix of the first and third modes (vestiges of the display of anthropological artefacts transfigured into art and embedded in a contemporary acknowledgment of cultural difference). For its part, the BM Africa Gallery combines all three display paradigms: a relatively traditional ethnographic display, a modernist display geared to maximum aesthetic impact and more contemporary preoccupations with cultural diversity evidenced in displays of masquerade and ephemera. A further and yet more radically ‘embedded’ account within the scope of the third paradigm can be found in the permanent display of Benin art at the Horniman Museum in south London. Curated not by an English but by a Nigerian guest curator (subsequently Director of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments), this display both frames the plaques as aesthetic objects and situates them in a cultural web, secured both by a connected video of contemporary bronze production in Benin City and captioning in the Edo language, with the Edo title placed above the English ‘translation’ – as well as a panel of interpretation derived from Edo oral history.<sup>11</sup>

In the wake of the ‘expanded field’ of the post-Second World War neo-avant-garde, conceptual art, and finally global postmodernism, institutions both temporary and permanent, such as Documenta and Tate Modern, have little or no difficulty displaying contemporary Chinese or

African art alongside installations of Western equivalents. The key antecedent here, for all its undoubted problems, was *Magiciens de la terre* of 1989.<sup>12</sup> The parity continues with an exhibition such as *Africa Remix* at the Hayward Gallery.<sup>13</sup> This is all now unproblematic, marking a considerable shift from the disputes only twenty years ago around *The Other Story* exhibition, which now read like bulletins from a bygone age.<sup>14</sup> In this respect contemporary cultural globalization may be said to solve its own problems (even as it creates others: the unscrupulous exploitation of 'indigenous' markets being one such).

The situation with the display of non-Western *pre-modern* artefacts as art is more tensioned. After much controversy the Louvre does have the annexe, or perhaps it should be the ghetto, of the Pavillon des Sessions, though the Louvre is anyway a sort of combination of the National Gallery and the BM. In England we have yet to see the Benin bronzes in the National Gallery, though the Royal Academy regularly hosts temporary exhibitions of non-Western art (Africa; Aztec Mexico; Japanese prints, to name only three of the most prominent) in the same galleries it uses on other occasions to show contemporary art. The Victoria & Albert Museum, rooted in the 1851 Exhibition, does display non-Western material, albeit under the rubric of the 'decorative arts'. The BM of course, also shows non-Western cultures, though as we have seen, it is not always clear whether the work is shown as art, artefact or craft, and there is an audible grinding of gears when contemporary art by individuated artists is displayed alongside the historical collection. Unlike the Louvre, the BM never displays anything from the core Western canon of 'art'; that is not its purpose. That is the purpose of the National Gallery . . . And so on . . . The boundaries are fluid, as between conceptions of 'fine art' and 'the lesser arts', as well as between the canonical art of the West and historically extra-canonical art from elsewhere around the globe. Museological display solutions are ad hoc. The category 'art' expands and contracts according to fashion and the motive of the curator, and there is a sense that everyone 'knows what it really means' anyway . . . Which is another way of saying that, conceptually, it is all rather a mess. This is one reason why an analysis of display is so important. Bricks and mortar, real spaces, have a way of dramatizing the contradictions and assumptions that run below the surface of art historical debate about 'world art'.<sup>15</sup>

### Restitution

The Berlin Benin display contained a documentary section on the events of 1897: blown-up photographs and illustrations from the *Illustrated London News* of subjects such as the British column advancing into Benin territory and the so-called crucifixion trees. There was also in this section a curious, military-grey painted panel with a slit, like a peep-hole into a cell, or the view from a pill-box. Which in effect is what it was. The view through the slit revealed one of the 1897 photographs of British soldiers sitting inside the palace compound surrounded by dozens of brass and ivory objects, plaques, figures and carved tusks roughly laid out on the ground.

This is the moral heart of the Benin art issue. It is the brute fact that stands behind all those modes of display, as anthropological artefact, as primitive art, as token of cultural difference.<sup>16</sup> It is how the objects got to be displayed in the first place, in London, Berlin or Vienna. It is their defining moment, the moment of their theft, and the moment, as it were, of their symbolic death within one form of life. It is also, of course, the moment of their emergence onto a world stage, and of their rebirth into another form of life. It is the moment of their passage from religion into art.

Unlike many similarly notorious cases, including the Parthenon marbles, there are no grey areas, no dubious contracts, no questions about whether those who were doing the selling knew what they were parting with. The Benin bronzes were stolen pure and simple. Or, rather, they were appropriated as war booty – and not for their intrinsic interest as art or any other thing, but in order to defray the costs of the punitive expedition, including support for the dependants of British casualties. They were not taken *for* the BM they were sold *to* the museum and similar institutions and private collectors through the medium of commercial dealers.

When we produced our Open University course, in the year of the bicentennial of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the question of the ownership of the Benin bronzes, and whether they should or should not return to West Africa, was one issue that could not be avoided. The way we addressed this was to present two voices, each putting one side of the case, and let the students make up their own minds. The two voices were those of a black British artist and curator from Manchester, Kevin Dalton Johnson, and a white curator from the African department of the BM, Christopher Spring.

The question of the restitution of the Benin bronzes is one of those that seem simple at first glance but become very complicated the further one investigates. It is also highly emotive. Our speaker who favoured the return of the bronzes eloquently linked their theft to imperialism and slavery, which he described as ‘the African Holocaust’. He made the return of the sculptures to Nigeria a test case of international equality, and for him any counter-argument was tantamount to an endorsement of inequality and as such a symptom of continuing imperialism.<sup>17</sup> From that point of view, the sculptures were stolen and they should be returned to their rightful owners; while in the West, whether in private collections or in public museums, they are *de facto* hostages, severed from the cultural context that gives them meaning. This extends to the issue of the objects’ safety. To question the ability of Nigerian museums to protect them is to question the ability of Africans to manage themselves, and is as such symptomatic of continuing, albeit disguised, racism. Such arguments are also widely rehearsed on the Internet, notably in the publications of Kwame Opoku, and were the substance of MP Bernie Grant’s campaign, around the time of the centenary of the looting of the bronzes, for the Africa Reparations Movement. They continue to attract widespread support.

The other side of the argument is most publicly identified with the Director of the BM, Neil MacGregor and James Cuno, the Director of the Art Institute of Chicago. The nub of the argument is that the ‘universal’ or

'encyclopaedic' museum represents an Enlightenment project to preserve and display the manifold cultures of the human race for humanity as a whole, now and in the future; that such institutions do the best job of looking after them that can be done and that they have a responsibility to generations as yet unborn to do so. It will be seen that two themes are intermingled here: on the one hand an argument about security and safety; on the other a more complex moral argument about the question of 'cultural patrimony', about rights of ownership and about cultural nationalism as contrasted with humanity in a more universal sense. In addition to those already cited, the most nuanced discussion of these issues that I know can be found in the writing of the Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.<sup>18</sup>

The moral weight of the argument for restitution seems formidable. The Benin bronzes are stolen goods, their original meanings were embedded in the cultural and religious practices of Benin. It is a short step from there to argue that to display them in Western museums either as cultural artefacts or even as works of art, is to denature them, to trivialize them and to truncate their significance. At first glance, the counter argument seems shaky by comparison. Even if it is true that the objects are secured for the future by the conservation practices of the great museums, the Enlightenment-inspired claim that they are preserving culture for all of humanity is compromised by the power relations that subtend this situation. In a word, they are all in the West. There is a chasm between the 'is' and the 'ought'. And the chasm is filled with the toxic waste of slavery, racism, imperialism, the detritus of history-as-nightmare. In such a situation it is difficult if not impossible to arrive at a 'balanced' assessment of the arguments. History obtrudes, and inescapably frames the meanings of the objects.<sup>19</sup>

A more general issue, which forms a kind of backdrop to all these arguments, is the matter of identity politics. Our speaker in favour of restitution, himself a black British artist of Jamaican parents, felt able to speak throughout in the first person plural. From his position, it simply does not matter that he has never been to Africa, or indeed that on his one visit to Jamaica he was subject to criticism from locals for being 'British'. 'We' means 'black' and being black enables him to speak with authority, as a representative of those who have been robbed, on the question of the restitution of important cultural property. From that position, this identification overrides all other arguments and counterarguments, and has the further effect of rendering counterarguments hollow, even before they are articulated. They implicitly become excuses for the concealed interests of a different and undeclared set of identifications – principally 'white' and 'colonialist', which are held to subtend the speaker's discursive arguments whether he or she is aware of it or not.

Clearly this is only to begin to raise a far-reaching question. Even to articulate it raises the temperature, and to investigate it fully would take us far beyond the scope of the present article. I want to short-circuit the discussion by saying that I agree with Suman Gupta's argument that it is possible to retain a conception of identity as socially constructed, that is to continue to resist an essentialist politics of identity, and yet to reject an



identity politics according to which, to choose the most obvious examples, women and non-Western people have privileged positions on questions concerning the lived experiences of gendered and raced or ethnic being-in-the-world. That is to state the matter too crudely, but for present purposes it serves as a marker. All I shall do at this point is echo Gupta's argument in his study, to the effect that, while the institutionalization of social constructionist identity politics in literary studies and other humanistic and social sciences disciplines 'has been an enlightening and expansive process in some respects, it has also emphatically been one that has spread limits and constraints . . . curtailing free debate and exchange in significant ways'. In contrast, Gupta has argued that:

Any expression of a political position . . . is open to critical engagement and debate by anyone, anywhere . . . It does not matter who (as a gendered body) [and of course this goes also to questions of race and ethnicity] is articulating or acting in this political arena; all that matters is what basis of integrity, knowledge and understanding, and emotional investment (by a critical and communicative agent) is being brought to the arena.<sup>20</sup>

As I say, this is an issue with too many ramifications to resolve here, but to state it is a necessary prelude to the next part of my discussion, or perhaps I should say to the next episode of the story I am telling. I am not naive enough to believe that first-hand experience is going to cut through this Gordian knot; experience, we know, is always mediated. There is no straight way through this thicket. There appears to be a gulf between an unanswerable moral case – the return of stolen goods – and an undeniable fact that, at the present historical point, objects including the Benin bronzes are physically safer in institutions such as the BM than they would be in a comparable institution in Nigeria. Actually, I do not feel that the opposition is quite so simple. I think the really difficult problems are not between facts and values, but are squarely located in the field of values themselves, in arguments about cultural patrimony, nationalism and identity politics. But at that point, in 2008, I still had a blind spot for which no amount of intellectual debate seemed able to compensate. Reading arguments by museum people and critics such as Sally Price and Charles Gore, Neil MacGregor or James Cuno, or the artist Peju Layiwola or the philosopher Anthony Appiah, could not make up for the fact that I had never been to Africa. I am aware that 'seeing for yourself' has little currency in certain parts of academe. But for better or for worse I could not help feeling that in a matter of this kind, something about weighing the pros and cons in books, or even in seminar rooms and lecture theatres here in Britain, is lacking. There is a long tradition of this kind of thing, of course. Winckelmann never went to Greece, Arthur Waley never went to China. But, in my impasse, I felt I had to go to Nigeria, to Benin in fact. It might not help (and in the end I am not sure it did). But still I had to. However undecided I might remain, intellectually, politically and morally, I felt that something attaching to the experience of being in those places and talking to people there might at least put some foundation under my uncertainty that would be lacking otherwise.

So I went. I visited the National Museum in Lagos. I visited the National Museum in Benin City. I visited the brass casters district there, now

designated a Unesco World Heritage site. I spoke to artists and academics in Benin and presented a research seminar at the University of Lagos. These experiences add up to a story in themselves, though it is one that I must leave aside for now. Nigeria is a powerful and vibrant country, but it presents difficulties for a stranger. It is difficult to get to and it is difficult to get around without help, even with the greatest hospitality and practical assistance it is possible to provide. Nigeria is potentially a rich country, but actually a poor one. Partly this is to do with deep-rooted corruption within the political system. Partly it is to do with the effects of the IMF Structural Adjustment programmes which have enforced privatization on the economy. That is to say, the West is not without responsibility for the state of the country.

Given that background, it is not surprising that the state of the National Museum in Lagos leaves much to be desired, or that the condition of the provincial museum in Benin City is worse. An enormous injection of funds would be the precondition for even beginning to reach a level of facilities commensurate with the most unmodernized museum in Europe or North America. Sad as it may be, that is the reality of the situation. None of the criteria of security or preservation raised by the arguments about the universal museum can be met. I take that as an unhappy fact. What is at issue is whether it matters. While I was there I was told that the Ford Foundation was engaged in the early stages of a proposal to renovate the National Museum to the tune of tens of millions of US dollars. Personally I would have thought the US would have to spend what it has been spending on its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to even begin to make museum facilities and infrastructure in Lagos of a standard comparable to the norm in Europe. Hopefully work on this scale will happen in the future. In the wake of the current technological revolution Nigeria will eventually become prosperous and a museum like the Acropolis museum in Athens will emerge. At the present time, we are not in that situation.

One of the things I found most interesting was that, in discussing the issue of 'restoration' in the here and now, there were different positions evident within Nigeria as well as here in Britain. In the discussion following my talk at the University of Lagos, there is no question that there was a basic sympathy for the project of returning the Benin bronzes to Nigeria and a justifiable prickliness about their retention by Western museums. But there were different inflections to people's concerns. I will try to discuss two of them.

Here is the contribution by Professor Rufus T. Akinyele, an historian and at that point the acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts:

This isn't a question as such, it might be a way of finding some kind of compromise between the two views. Looking at the issue of restitution, and whether to retain the works of art in Europe or whether to bring them back home – I am not trying to turn back the hands of the clock, but when we repatriate these works of ours, are we sure they are not going to find their way back [i.e. to Europe] through illegal means? We also want these things to be shown to the outside world. But one thing I also know is that where they are now, these works of art are busy generating funds for different countries. It is possible to assess, say for the last ten years, how many people have visited the British Museum – and on the basis of that you can work out a formula . . . you can do the ratio – two to three or whatever – you allow them to take a

percentage and then you repatriate a percentage back to the source, to their original homeland. In that case we shall be happy. They will be staying where they are, but we are also getting something in return.<sup>21</sup>

Professor Akinyele seems to acknowledge the problem of corruption and the black market in stolen antiquities. He thus argues not for a return of the objects themselves so much as for a share of the income derived from their display abroad to be reimbursed to their place of origin, as a form of investment in Nigerian art and culture. A minor but not insignificant point is that the professor seems not to acknowledge that entrance to the BM is free. He believes that a proportion of the entrance fees can be repaid to the country of origin. Whereas precisely this is, of course, one of MacGregor's main points: entry is free. Or, at least, and this would be a Nigerian point, it is free to anyone who has managed to get to England. But Professor Akinyele's oversight is a small one. Some recompense along those lines could and should be made. Now. In the fullness of time, when Nigeria is open and prosperous and home to high-standard museums, surely some kind of circulating system of the sculptures should operate. In the meantime the provision of direct financial recompense (in addition to other long-term work by Western museums in developing museums and cultural practices in Africa, which are extensive and continuous) seems a modest and justified demand.

Nonetheless, a very different and more radical point of view was passionately argued by Dr Bruce Onobrakpeya, one of Nigeria's most senior artists and cultural ambassadors:

The other thing I want to talk about is this 'restitution'. I take the position of the monarch of Benin. He wants this art to be brought back because they are not just mere 'things'. They are things that reflected the history and reflected the culture, reflected the religion; and where there was writing in the West, this art stood for writing, stood for the collective memory of the people. Now when you think of them this way, they show the young people who are being born, who have no access to the knowledge that has been recorded by the older people, the older generation, and so they are not able to grow as fast as they should have done. So I take the position of the monarch – Bring these artworks back!

For Dr Onobrakpeya, the situation is different from that of Professor Akinyele. As far as he is concerned, the sculptures have their cultural meaning in the religious ceremonies of the court of Benin. They are stripped of those meanings when they are kept elsewhere. And, no less importantly, the cultural life of the people of Benin is impoverished by their absence. For those reasons, the sculptures should be returned now. I think this argument is very powerful. And, I have to say, it splits me down the middle. In some ways the simplest response would be to accede to it and have done. It is logically straightforward, it is ethically forceful indeed and it regards people as more important than objects.

So why do I find myself hesitating before it? I think I have two types of reason. One concerns a conception of culture and society, the other concerns a conception of art. As I understand it, the present King of Benin is the descendant of absolute monarchs, and no royal palace in history has been a democratic institution. I feel it is important to distinguish between arguments about returning the bronzes to public museums in Nigeria and

returning them to the royal palace for use in religious ceremonies. Historians of Nigeria and Benin, including John Picton and Charles Gore, have argued that the prevailing history of the Benin royal dynasty is far from the long-running legitimacy of the widely promulgated image.<sup>22</sup> It represents a form of hegemony that conceals both ruptures in the dynastic succession itself (including client status to the British before independence) and the existence and legitimacy of other more popular cultural-religious practices within the wider society of Benin (before colonization, during it and since independence).

For my part I am a secular post-Enlightenment European intellectual and I have no wish to bolster royal power anywhere. This obviously brings up further arguments about cultural imperialism, cultural pluralism, the imposition of Western models, in short questions of power relations and legitimacy. Some convoluted questions ensue. As a republican in England am I committed on anti-colonialist grounds to support the claims of a monarch in Africa? Am I, by resisting the claims of an African monarch, perpetuating the power relations of British imperialism? Whatever labyrinths these questions subtend, and whatever monsters lurk in them, my belief at this time is that I do not want works of art to be removed from public view, from public accessibility, whatever the nature of claims about the matrix of beliefs and practices whence they historically emerged. I would feel exactly the same about a work of Christian religious art being removed from the National Gallery and placed in an Italian monastery or about the portrait of a Spanish king being removed from the same museum and hung in a Spanish royal palace of the present day. That said, it must also be acknowledged that 'public accessibility' is relative. As Dr Onobrakpeya himself forcefully, and rightly, argued – in the contemporary condition of 'Fortress Europe', let alone within the prevailing conditions of global wealth distribution, the collections of the BM and similar institutions can scarcely be claimed to be 'accessible' to Africans.

Accepting that important qualification, my response goes to a set of post-Enlightenment more or less socialistic beliefs about power and the public sphere. Yet it also goes to a second set of concerns, about a particular conception of art. These I want to try and discuss in a separate and final section.

But first I have to try to clarify my position on the demand for restitution. I have already said that I have misgivings about removing the bronzes from an art context and resituating them in a less than fully public, potentially exclusive social context oriented around religious practice and the exercise of political power. But the question of restitution into a museum situation in either Benin or Lagos is substantially different. As I see it, the moral case is in principle unanswerable, whereas the practical situation is very different. I say 'in principle', but I do not think that principle extends to the removal of all Benin works to Nigeria any more than it would make sense to return all Impressionist paintings to France. I think what I think is this. At present little can be done: the existing museums are dilapidated and any works returned would be at risk (though financial recompense is another matter). If, however, the Ford Foundation plan materializes over the next few years I should have

thought there was an unanswerable case for the BM to contribute sufficient works from its enormous Benin holdings (only a small proportion of which are actually on display in the BM) to enrich any new displays in the National Museum in Lagos as part of the planning of that museum. This would at least disperse some of the bad feeling engendered by the BM's refusal to lend the famous Benin ivory mask to the Festac exhibition in 1977. This was still a *cause célèbre* in the debate following my paper at the University of Lagos in October 2008, and regarded as evidence of Western bad faith (despite the BM's repeated claim that the loan was refused on conservation grounds). More than that, I would say there should be some symbolic transfer of ownership of the Benin works back to the Nigerian state (not to the monarch of Benin) with the concession of permanent loan to London (or elsewhere) of the works required for display there. In time, when Nigeria has become more stable politically and economically, I would hope for a system of exchanges between those Western museums that currently have Benin holdings and new museums in Nigeria, on an equal footing. There is, after all, enough to go round; and it is important to reiterate that the works – any works – ultimately 'belong' to humankind rather than to a transient state apparatus.

#### **'World art history'?**

I will return now to the question of 'art', and to the second of my reservations about Dr Onobrakpeya's argument. It has been claimed, with considerable justification I would say, that in art history today there is no more pressing question than that of 'world art'. I want to use this section of my article to try to tie together some loose ends which remain from the foregoing discussions of 'display' and 'restitution'.

It is widely acknowledged that the modern system of the arts came into being in the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Although Paul Oskar Kristeller's argument has been reopened to contemporary debate, for present purposes I am accepting that when we talk about 'art' we are not talking about a natural category, that we are certainly not talking about a category with a fixed, unchanging, transhistorical or transgeographical essence, but about category with a history. The history with which I am concerned, moreover, is a history articulated in Europe. Practices of an art-like nature, for want of a better way of putting it, symbolic practices with an aesthetic dimension, have existed throughout human history, in all times and in all places. This is not quite the same as saying that 'art' has always existed. By 'art' we have come to mean something historical and particular.

If this seems merely to be a case of semantics, of wantonly making things difficult for ourselves, I shall try to clarify the point. When we talk of 'Ancient Egyptian art', we are not saying that the ancient Egyptians had a concept of art at one with that which provides the criteria for, let us say, inclusion at this year's Venice Biennale; that there is an enduring concept which has persisted ever since, from the former to the latter, underlying all the vagaries of actual expression. That would be to claim that art is indeed the kind of transhistorical essence we have already agreed it is not. What I

think we are doing when we refer to 'Ancient Egyptian art' (and here I follow John Baines) is, first, to acknowledge that in ancient Egypt there was a practice of wall decoration, statue-making, etc., which was not completely and in its entirety client to the dictates of religion and secular power. Second, it is to acknowledge that that practice developed its own codes and traditions and conventions, what Baines calls its 'decorum', that distinguished it from the practice of religion and politics.<sup>24</sup> In a word it enjoyed relative autonomy. What we are doing then, when we refer to 'Ancient Egyptian art', is mapping back our conception of a relatively autonomous cultural practice onto another relatively autonomous cultural practice 3,000 years ago which was, however, in many respects very different from what we mean by 'art' in our contemporary culture (for example, it was collective, its authors were largely anonymous, it had no specifically dedicated sites of display, it had no explicit publicly articulated aesthetic discourse surrounding it, etc.). So the Egyptians, as it were, both did and did not have 'art'. They did not have our conception of art but they did have something that shared enough with our conception of art to warrant a careful mapping of our category onto theirs, as long as we remain alert to the differences. Much the same, of course, can be said of the European medieval production of 'art', or even of the workshop practices of the early Renaissance.

The eighteenth century saw the emergent separation of the spheres in European life and thought, and one of the consequences of this was the increasing independence of art in Western culture from service to various non-art ends, be these religious, political or moral. The subsequent history of the development of modernism in the nineteenth century saw visual art being further prised apart from narrative. By the end of the century the idea of a fully independent art was accepted in the avant-garde. This is a conventional sense of the development of modernism. Subsequent critics of various stripes have questioned as well as celebrated the autonomy of art, but few would dispute that the practice of art in the West in the century or so from c.1860 to c.1960 operated relatively autonomously from external controlling agencies. (This is not the same as subscribing to the ideology of a 'free art'.) In that, art is of a piece with other sectors within modern Western sociality. The relative autonomy of art has not been separate from the growth of democracy and individual liberty. It should go without saying that this is not to identify modern art with capitalism. It may be more accurate to say that its characteristic features evolved in a constant tension with and as a partial negation of capitalism. But by the same token it most certainly does not have *nothing* to do with that economic system and its dependent social relations.

By the time the crisis of modernism began to build, early in the second half of the twentieth century, within the orbit of the avant-garde, that is to say not just in Europe and North America, but also in Australia, Japan, parts of South America, parts of Africa, the pursuit of art as an independent practice was a given. What was at issue in these different places varied widely. In the metropolitan avant-garde heartlands the crisis and critique of modernism were generally experienced as a need to reconnect with a lived culture beyond art; in newly independent countries it was

often felt as the need to construct a national art. But in all these situations there was the assumption of an artist as an independent figure, perhaps taking decisions about the relevance of art to society at large, but doing so as an independent contributor, not an artisan or craftsman taking commissions or instructions from an outside body which controlled the whole range of activity from choice of subject to means of representation.

The art of the expanded field, which sought to interact with and influence a wide range of non-art activities and modes of being stood, so to speak, on the shoulders of autonomy, assumed the independence that modernism had gained. The hinge here was conceptual art, in its broadest sense: the movement that went beyond the finite formal configuration intended 'for eyesight alone', and licensed not merely an expanded range of objects but an expanded range of activities to qualify as practices of art.<sup>25</sup> It is important, I think, to see that it is this conception of art that informs the globalization of art in the late twentieth century and since. I am not just talking about the globalization of art as a symptom of the globalization of the economy. Rather I mean the active, internal logic of the process whereby, on the one hand there is the expansion of the practice of contemporary art into regions which had previously largely stood outside the practice of the international avant-garde, such as China and India; but on the other hand there is also the 'retrospective' expansion of 'art' to cover traditional practices that most certainly were not conceived and produced under the rubric of an autonomous art.

This had already taken place within the Western tradition, as earlier religiously determined visual practices, such as those we think of as Renaissance art, were translated out of the region of religion per se and into the region of the aesthetic – considered as relatively autonomous. We have already seen how it happened to a diverse range of cultural activities and products that became designated 'primitive art'. But with the shift from modernist essentialism to a postmodernist aesthetic of diversity a global pool of works and activities appeared within the expanded domain of art. The result has been that 'art', a category that developed in Europe, that subsequently underwent a conceptual narrowing (e.g. securing its independence from literature) and then, on the basis of the security conferred by that narrowing, underwent a secondary phase of conceptual expansion, now includes not only an unmade bed but a Renaissance altarpiece, not only a pickled shark but a Chinese DVD, *as well as* a tenth-century Byzantine ivory, a fifteenth-century Aztec mask, a seventeenth-century Islamic pen-and-ink drawing, a nineteenth-century Japanese print and a twentieth-century painting made in Australia representing an ancient Aboriginal myth from the dreamtime in modern acrylic paints on linen support, subsequently sold at Sotheby's for a million Australian dollars.

I know I am labouring this point, but I think it is both important and difficult in respect of a viable conception of 'world art'. On the one hand I am trying to argue that today's 'world art' – including not just contemporary Chinese DVDs but also Aboriginal art with its roots in the Dreaming – is a modern phenomenon. But, on the other hand, I am also seeking to avoid affirming the ideology of one-way traffic that underwrote a

conventional sense of the priority of the modern Western avant-garde. On the contrary, I want to affirm that the sense an African artist made of Western *mimesis*, the sense a Japanese printmaker made of perspective, the sense an Indian poet made of concepts of rhythm and expression, the sense an Aboriginal artist today makes of modernist colour field painting . . . all these are in principle no different from the sense a European avant-gardist made of an African mask. I think the overall situation that is in play here is, to employ a classic formulation, one of combined and uneven development.

In the present compass, I cannot aspire to map these relations adequately. It may, however, be easier to say what is *not* going on in this complex process. First, what is not going on is the accretion in a liberal spirit of ever more practices around a historically continuous, stable, easily definable core concept of 'art'. Second, what is also not going on is that a narrow Western definition of art as autonomous and 'merely' aesthetic has been supplanted by a more inclusive understanding of art derived from a wide range of cultural practices occurring in the rest of the world.

Both beliefs are widely subscribed to. Examples of the former are not hard to provide, if only because they arguably comprise something like the contemporary unexamined common sense of the liberal consciousness. This stance makes everybody, everybody in the West at least, feel good. It is completely illusory and ultimately self-serving.

An example of the second cropped up in the discussion following my talk in Lagos.<sup>26</sup> When Bruce Onobrakpeya says that modern Western art is a 'carbon copy' of African art, and that Africans have a deeper respect for and appreciation of art than Westerners, he is saying something important, and forceful, as well as complex and compressed. Perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is the framing in terms of appropriation and exploitation. It would be a deficient art history that did not acknowledge the power relations subtending late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European interest in the arts of Africa, that did not acknowledge the murky waters out of which 'pure form and pure expression' were distilled. Moreover, the circuit he elliptically describes – whereby 'modern' art builds on African models, undergoes transformations into 'postmodernist' multimedia installations and becomes globalized – is in itself unproblematic; what makes it challenging is the position from which it is being said, and the conclusions drawn. For my part, I feel that one of Dr Onobrakpeya's conclusions is valid, the other not. First, he is saying that a relationship to art that is an 'organic' part of a way of life (as in the case of Benin ceremonial) is richer than a relationship to a form of commodity production defined by the market. Faced by the commodification and spectacularization of so much contemporary art, its sheer complicity with elite consumption, its role as a kind of court jester to finance capital, it would be hard indeed to disagree. (Although I think that what is really at issue here is the form of life in question rather than just the relation of art to it: the hunger for wholeness has its own dark history.) On the whole, however, I found myself in agreement with both Dr Onobrakpeya and many others in the audience over their unease with the apparent domination of market forces in the art production of the West. But I believe



Dr Onobrakpeya is mistaken in the conclusion he draws from the other part of his argument when he says that complex cultural configurations such as shrines and the practices that take place around them were appropriated from African examples by Western artists of the late twentieth century intent on enriching their own practice and then replayed back to the world as 'postmodernist' art.

I want to try to get this out in the open in a moment. But first I want to note that the same nexus of 'expanded' postmodernist conceptions of art and global cultural practice figures in a different way in Charles Gore's important redescription of art in Benin. The conjunction is obviously a resonant one. When composing his critique of the conventional histories of Benin art, focused exclusively on the products of the court and its associated guilds, Gore draws on both the expanded field of art – that is, performance art, installation art, etc. – and the suspension of value judgement that was an important lever in the early critique of formalist, aestheticist modernism to license an argument that performative activities around shrines, as well as the physical aspects of shrines all the way from mimetic concrete or wooden figures to ephemeral chalk 'drawings' and feathers, are as valid forms of 'art' as the classic bronze sculptures of the royal court (and, *a fortiori*, as valid as the Western canon).

I want to say two things about the expanded field and African (and other global) art practices. First, early essays in the expanded field of art – I am thinking of such things as Happenings and Fluxus events (or even fore-runners such as Dadaist cabarets, Futurist soirées and Constructivist mass spectacles) as well as fully fledged postmodernist installations and performances – did not build on African examples. (The earlier ones were most probably rooted in the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*, the later ones precisely in the occluded historical avant-garde itself and its revolutionary setting.) Second, early twentieth-century modernist abstract and expressionist art most certainly did build on African examples. The difference is crucial. Picasso and others were not interested in ceremonies, masquerades, ritual performances and so on (except perhaps as a kind of background to their fantasies about the 'primitive'). What interested them were the formal properties of objects they encountered in European museums. They embraced these formal properties, which they mis-read in terms of a modern European theory of intense emotional expression as giving rise to distortion (distortion that is, relative to the mimetic norm of European art), and translated them into their own art.

It is most important to get the balance right here, the balance of forces between Africa, the European academic tradition and the European avant-garde. Charles Gore says of the art of Benin that, when it appeared in Europe, it 'so clearly was it an art produced by a major civilisation', comparable to the art of the Italian Renaissance, that it 'changed Western attitudes and resulted in a new appreciation of the arts of Africa'.<sup>27</sup> This has to be qualified. First, the Renaissance comparison is overstated. The craftsmanship involved and the technology of lost-wax bronze casting was indeed linked to the Renaissance. But it was not taken as evidence of a persisting major civilization. What it did was encourage racist nineteenth-century degenerationist arguments that Benin society had declined from a

level of civilization which they attributed to significant European influence in the sixteenth century. Culturally orthodox museum men had a lot of difficulty squaring the undeniable evidence of the bronzes' technical sophistication with the absence of a civilization they could recognize as such in 1897. It is not the case that Africa was suddenly promoted to the premier league of world civilizations, more that the discovery of sophisticated art appeared to demonstrate the presence of a previous civilization that had declined.

On the other side of the European cultural divide, as between academy and avant-garde, the leading modernist Roger Fry, in his appreciation of 'Negro Sculpture' written later, in 1920, explicitly differentiated what he saw as the artistic achievement of African wood carvings from what he also saw as the absence of an African civilization.<sup>28</sup> The new appreciation of African art arose not out of the categories of art into which the Benin bronzes were uncomfortably fitted, i.e. the canonical categories of noble materials, sophisticated craftsmanship and a high degree of mimesis. On the contrary, the new appreciation arose out of the transformed categories of the avant-garde, which were constructed in opposition to canonical forms and values around beliefs about abstraction, purification, distortion and the direct expression of emotion. The Benin bronzes were able to figure in this constellation of values in two far from straightforward ways. In one, they could be 'translated' from a quasi-classical mimetic formal language associated with bronze-casting into the discourse of the 'primitive' *as if* they were 'distorted' direct carvings. As Kirchner, Pechstein and Macke did.<sup>29</sup> Or on the other hand the Benin bronzes could be admitted to employ a high degree of technical sophistication in the service of mimesis, in which case they were of little interest to the avant-garde, in fact having more in common with the academic art the avant-garde was arraigned against. As Carl Einstein did.<sup>30</sup> The general re-evaluation of African art – or, more precisely, of African carvings *as 'art'* – derived from the avant-garde. It is part and parcel of a wider redefinition of the artefacts of several cultures as 'primitive' art, under the rubric of 'expression'. The Benin bronzes get carried along with this more generalized 're-evaluation' of African art and, more tenuously, of African civilization; they do not *cause* it.

That is, the concept of 'art' expanded under the impact of the early twentieth-century avant-garde's rejection of the classical canon; the proximity to this of the Benin bronzes caused a problem for the status quo. It was the bronzes' partial formal comparability to canonical (that is, 'realistic') Western art that caused the moral problem over the issue of African civilization. Other forms of African culture – music, dance, masks, wooden carved figures, let alone the gamut of utilitarian objects from baskets to boats, instruments to weapons – were not suddenly opened to being regarded as art by culturally orthodox Europeans (and of course one can say the same for European 'folk art' too). For that to happen, one had to have an aesthetic rooted in 'significant' or 'expressive' form, not one focused on craft skill and mimesis.

It is precisely the resulting formalist, autonomous conception of art that is the *sine qua non* for expansion into a wide variety of linked objects and

practices: from bottle racks to bus tickets, to mixed media performances, etc. It is only when this constellation of activities, almost half a century later, eventually became fully legitimated as art, over the dead body, as it were, of formalist autonomous art, that anything and everything the world over – song, dance, performance, sitting in a bathful of offal, talking to a dead hare *and* designs from the Dreamtime, religious shrines in Benin, etc., etc., etc. – became candidates for being treated as ‘art’, with all the attendant pluses and minuses of that status: serious critical discussion, display in art galleries and museums, international travel *and* commercial exploitation on the (not entirely coincidentally, globalizing) market.

These kinds of matter obviously have a bearing on what sense we make of the notion of a ‘world history of art’, and it goes without saying that they are subjects of very widespread debate, many voices within which would disagree with what I have said here. It is argued, not infrequently, that an Indian organizing concept, or a Chinese organizing concept, could be used to tell a very different story of world art than the one told here.<sup>31</sup> I do not doubt that it could, nor indeed that in the future some such large-scale redescription might occur. But at the present time, as far as I can see, that which is being written about in books, taught in colleges and debated in conferences is ‘art’ understood as I have described it: a particular historical concept that has evolved in a particular way to a point where it has ‘invisibly’ assimilated its Others in a global continuum of difference; and that only that relatively autonomous, open conception of ‘art’ could have done so.

### Conclusion

So I want to come back finally to the argument about the Benin bronzes in the BM and elsewhere, and to the various debates over their mode of display and the question of their repatriation to Nigeria. As to mode of display, I take it that this is quite a simple matter. We have moved beyond treating things from outside Europe as not-art. (By the same token the producers or owners of things from ‘outside Europe’ are quite keen to have them designated as ‘art’ in a global marketplace.) Equally I think we have moved beyond separating things from their context under a rubric of universal form.

Nonetheless, this does not, to my mind, necessarily imply that we ‘move beyond’ a concept of art in the sense that the aesthetic object must needs become a vehicle for acquaintance with the wider culture.

In my view it remains important to continue to treat the ‘thing’ as an object of attention in its own right. This is one of the consequences of independence. The spectator has the choice whether to move on to a deeper cultural understanding of the piece in relation to its originary productive context. This is not necessarily the same as responding to it as a work of art and going on to make something else. It is no less important to register that originating socio-cultural context does not confer *the* meaning of the work (any more than does the intention of the artist in a more psychological sense). If we know anything from postmodernism, it is that meanings are plural, constructed and mutable. There is nothing

wrong with picking something up and running with it, or, in more polite contemporary language, 'translating' it. The fact that Picasso ill-understood the socio-religious function of African masks does not detract from the significance of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the history of art, be that European art or 'world' art. Neither, of course, does it preclude someone else from making a valid work of art out of a critical encounter with Picasso's historically specific encounter with Africa, wherever they live. These things are not mutually exclusive.

I think I have said what I want to say about restitution. All I would emphasize is that I do not think all works of art should go back to where they came from: all Viking art in Iceland, all Impressionist painting in France, any more than all Benin art in Benin. What I would hope for is that at some point in the future a beautiful, secure, air-conditioned museum comes to pass in Benin City, perhaps along the lines of the Luxor museum in Egypt, which could house a comprehensive display of Benin works, and that interested visitors from all over the world could travel to Benin City to see them, and perhaps experience other manifold and complex aspects of the culture which gave birth to them.

Even if that situation were to happen, I do not think *all* Benin works of art should go there. Though I do think it would be perfectly proper for works to circulate between Benin, Berlin, London or wherever on a mutually agreed basis according to programmes worked out independently by museum specialists in all those countries in accordance with an international law formulated for the purpose (that is, without national political coercion). But that situation does not exist at the moment. There is a real danger that if works were returned to Benin in the present political and economic situation, they would be lost: either through physical decay or through various forms of theft, looting, etc. There is a further chance that, even if they were not lost, they would become difficult of access within the palace – and to my mind this is only marginally less serious than the matter of physical loss. They would be lost as art, as 'world art', indeed.

This suggests to me a further important consideration. For I do not agree with the argument that showing objects in glass cases in museums is to debase them, to denude them of their 'proper' meanings. As it happens, the 'glass case' argument is something of a rhetorical red herring. Modern museums often try to move away from glass display cases, other than for purposes of safety and preservation. To my mind, to be involved in an imaginative transaction with a work of art, to contemplate it for itself, to reflect upon it, even to appreciate the technical skills of its fabrication if they are germane to the experience, is in no way secondary to a different sort of transaction wherein the object is a component within a religious ceremony; or, for that matter, a political injunction, or any other kind of contextualizing framework. It is 'texts' and not merely 'contexts' that have claims on our attention. I do not think it is any bad thing to escape the thrall of religion; quite the contrary, I think it is far better to engage in critically self-conscious reflection about the works of our fellow human beings conceived precisely as that, especially if this requires some imaginative work to understand the Other. I am not inclined to concede the tenets of secular humanism either to a theocratic imperative or to a brand of cultural

relativism that in fact depends precisely on the space of secular humanism for its own functionality.

Learning can undoubtedly be done and done well in a context where something was made and used. Why else would I myself have wanted to go to Africa rather than just read about the Benin bronzes? But this does not mean that a large proportion of what I know was not got from books. Ideally, I think, the acquaintance with a culture, the achievement of a sympathetic relationship to the Other, involves a dialectic of learning and looking in a variety of situations, some more or less contingent (this armchair, that library), some more or less essential (in the present case, the streets and buildings and people of Benin, Lagos, etc.; in another case, the river Nile and the tombs and temples of the Ancients). Part of my concern with identity politics is that I am suspicious of the claim that there is something congenitally inauthentic about a Western person's looking at an African sculpture in a museum; and, conversely, that authenticity resides in encountering it, not as a sculpture, as a work of art deserving of attention in its own right, but as a component of ritual. I am interested in works of art as part of an open situation, part of an open-ended self-consciousness about relations between different Others. That kind of openness is not something I readily associate with religion (any more than I associate it with the operation of spectacle, bureaucracy or market forces). But it is something that I associate with art.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- 1 The literature is extensive. Significant examples include Philip Dark, W. Forman and B. Forman, *Benin Art* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1960); R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973); Paula Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980; revd edn, London: British Museum Press; Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Nigel Barley, *The Art of Benin* (London: British Museum Press, 2010). For challenges to the dominant view, see John Picton, 'Edo Art, Dynastic Myth and Intellectual Aporia', *African Arts* 30, no. 4 (1997): 18–25, 92–3; Charles Gore, *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
- 2 See Kim Woods, 'The Art of Benin', Robin Mackie, 'The Conquest of Benin in the 1890s', Donna Loftus, 'The Art of Benin in Britain'; and Paul Wood, 'The Benin Bronzes and Modern Art', in *Cultural Encounters*, ed., Richard Danson Brown (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2008), 1–87.
- 3 Barbara Plankensteiner, ed., *Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*. Exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2007).
- 4 Christopher Spring, Nigel Barley and Julie Hudson, 'The Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum', *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (2001): 18–37, 93.
- 5 John Ruskin, *The Political Economy of Art* (Two Lectures delivered at Manchester) (London: Smith, Elder, 1857), 122 and 97 respectively.
- 6 Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, from their *Journal*; extracts reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds, *Art in Theory 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 415–18, 417.
- 7 Clive Bell, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', in *Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1914]), 3–37, 8.
- 8 Meyer Schapiro, 'The Nature of Abstract Art', in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978 [1937]), 185–211, 186.

- 9 See Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936) (several reprints available). William Rubin, ed., *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 vols (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).
- 10 Wall panel in Pavilion des Sessions, Musée du Louvre, which houses a selection of works from the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, opened in 2006. The panel commences by establishing a distance from modernist primitivism, and, even as it accentuates the aesthetic, modulates into an acknowledgement of the importance of context. 'The arrival in the Louvre – or rather the return – of art long considered unjustly to be primitive, is the culmination of a dream shared over a period of more than a century . . . A selection of around a hundred works of exceptional quality, which constitute a magnificent anthology of the art from these four continents, is at last being presented for public viewing . . . As well as the aesthetic impact of the works themselves, one also experiences the pleasure of discovering the history and function of the objects and the society that produced them.' As an exercise in having it both ways, this would be difficult to improve upon.
- 11 See Joseph Eboreime, 'Recontextualising the Horniman's Collection of Benin Bronzes', in *Re-Visions. New Perspectives on the African Collections of the Horniman Museum*, ed. Karel Arnaut (London: Horniman Museum and Gardens, 2000), 61–72.
- 12 Jean Hubert Martin, ed., *Magiciens de la Terre*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989).
- 13 Simon Njami, ed., *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery, 2005).
- 14 Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story*, exhibition catalogue (London: Hayward Gallery, 1989). For a selection of reviews and discussion by Rasheed Araeen, Brian Sewell, Peter Fuller, Homi Bhabha, Sutapa Biswas and Rita Keegan, see Steve Edwards, ed., *Art and its Histories: A Reader* (London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1999), 263–76.
- 15 See David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003). See also Paul Wood review, 'Reality Check', *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no 2 (2006), 293–6.
- 16 For a pioneering discussion of the reception of the Benin sculptures, see Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 17 'Since the advent of slavery, the African Holocaust, the Benin Bronzes have symbolised the intrinsic beauty and strength of African art and aesthetics. They also represent the pillage and rape of African people and cultures by European countries – a dehumanising attack for which there has been no reciprocity, compensation or apology. The Bronzes represent a culture rich in knowledge, technology and democracy; now dislocated in Europe they have become ornaments of pleasure sitting in glass cases in the drawing rooms of English private collectors, or being viewed and interpreted by gallery and museum visitors as examples of primitive art from the Dark Continent . . . the authorities must let the Benin Bronzes go home.' Kevin Dalton Johnson, extracts from wall panel accompanying an exhibition of prints by Tony Phillips, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2007.
- 18 Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Whose Culture Is It Anyway?', in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Alan Lane/Penguin, 2006), 115–35.
- 19 For further discussion of this issue in the context of colonization in Oceania, see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 20 Suman Gupta, *Social Constructionist Identity Politics and Literary Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 215, 94.
- 21 In verbal presentations of this paper I have used audio-recordings of the statements here transcribed. The statements by Professor Akinyele and Dr. Onobrakpeya were made during the discussion following my paper (on which the present article is based) given to a staff research seminar at the University of Lagos on October 21, 2008. The statements were informal and unrehearsed, and formed part of a wide-ranging discussion on questions of the restitution of works of art, and on relations and differences between the practice of art in Africa and in the West today. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks to Professor Duro Oni, then Head of the Department of Creative Arts, without whose assistance my research in Nigeria would have been impossible; also to his assistant Mr Ademola Olayiwola for his constant support and companionship during my visit. Later that day, Dr Onobrakpeya graciously received me at his home/studio where our discussions continued, despite the fact that he was very busy working on an exhibition catalogue. I should like to extend my thanks to Dr Onobrakpeya and also to Professor Peju Layiwola of the Department of Creative Arts, who organized my visit to the studio. I am indebted to all of them for their stimulating discussions and kindness during my visit to Nigeria.
- 22 See references in n.1.
- 23 Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics', in *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1965 [1951–2]), 163–227. The recent debate took place in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*: James I. Porter, 'Is Art Modern?' and Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Modern System of the Arts Reconsidered', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 no.1 (2009): 1–24; Larry Shiner, 'Continuity and Discontinuity in the Concept of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 2 (2009): 159–69; James I. Porter, 'Reply to Shiner', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 2 (2009), 171–8.

- 24 John Baines, 'On the Status and Purposes of Ancient Egyptian Art', in *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 298–337.
- 25 See Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (London: Tate Publications, 2002).
- 26 Bruce Onobrakpeya: 'The question about modern art . . . Modern art in the West is a carbon copy, things that are borrowed from contemporary African art . . . You borrow them . . . and then bring them back to the people as contemporary art, or postmodern art. The shrine is an example, installation is an example . . . Shrines and all that kind of thing are really ahead of their time . . . And the west took this, but later they brought it back to us, as if it came from the west . . . So what I am saying is that our people look at art, respect art, enjoy art, in a way that is superior to the way Westerners enjoy art, or see art and appreciate art.' Source as given in n. 21.
- 27 Gore, *Art, Performance and Ritual in Benin City*, 2.
- 28 Roger Fry, 'Negro Sculpture', in *Vision and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981 [1920]), 70–3.
- 29 For examples of a drawing and a woodcut by Kirchner and Pechstein respectively, see the illustrations to Heymer (ref. in n.30 below). In the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* (1912) Macke simply included the bronzes in a list of 'primitive' works: 'The cast bronzes of the Negroes in West Africa, the idols from the Easter Islands in the remotest Pacific, the cape of a chieftain from Alaska and the wooden masks from New Caledonia speak the same powerful language.' Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 89.
- 30 Carl Einstein wrote in his *Afrikanische Plastik* (1921): 'With the fledgling Cubism, we examined the African works of art and came upon perfect examples. While maintaining this point of view, nonetheless, and despite their technical sophistication, the highly esteemed arts of Yorubaland and Benin seem to us of no decisive significance.' Translated in Kay Heymer, 'The Art of Benin in German-speaking Countries: Notes on its Reception History in the Context of Avant-Garde Art 1910–1930', in Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals*, 246–53.
- 31 See various contributions to the debates reprinted in James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London: Routledge, 2007).

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