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# Encounters and the Diasporic Art of Africa: An Interview with Allyson Purpura, Curator of African Art, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois

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**Abstract:** In this paper, Jasmin Habib interviews Allyson Purpura, Curator of African Art at the Krannert Art Museum about the reinstallation of “Encounters: The Arts of Africa.” In the interview, they discuss how the objects on display have journeyed across the ocean as well as across epistemological categories tied to colonialism and the expansion of empire. The idea of “encounter” lies at the heart of this exhibition: the sometimes fraught histories of encounters between objects; the repurposing of tradition-based art into contemporary artworks; and, of course, the politics of display and the encounter between visitors to the museum and the artworks.

**Keywords:** African art, museology, diaspora, colonialism

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, Jasmin Habib interview Allyson Purpura, curateur d’art africain au musée d’art Krannert au sujet de la ré-installation « Encounters : The Arts of Africa ». Au cours de l’entrevue, elles discutent comment les objets exposés ont traversé aussi bien les océans que les catégories épistémologiques liées au colonialisme et à l’extension d’empire. L’idée de la « rencontre » siège au cœur de cette exposition où se tissent les histoires de rencontres parfois tendues entre les objets, la re-détermination des arts issus de la tradition dans des œuvres contemporaines et, bien sûr, les politiques d’exposition et la rencontre entre les visiteurs et les œuvres d’art.

**Mots-clés :** art africain, muséologie, diaspora, colonialisme

Allyson Purpura, curator of African art at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, began her career as a cultural anthropologist. She conducted fieldwork in Zanzibar, Tanzania, between 1989 and 1991 and completed her Ph.D. at the City University of New York Graduate Center under the supervision of Vincent Crapanzano. In her dissertation, *Knowledge and Agency: The Social Relations of Islamic Expertise in Zanzibar Town* (1997), Purpura explored the ways in which individuals come to be recognized as Islamic knowledge experts. Working through healers, diviners, spirit specialists, religious leaders, *Qur’an* teachers and scholars, Purpura came to understand Islamic expertise as a protean, performative way of knowing that resisted category and shaped relationships among people in myriad ways. She worked with women *sheikhs* in Sufi mystical brotherhoods, which created spaces for the collective expression of women’s knowledge and piety and functioned as support groups for members throughout the island. Islamic knowledge also featured significantly in the identity politics of Zanzibar, where tensions between a transoceanic cosmopolitanism and more parochial attachments to place and community enlivened debates about descent, rights and belonging.

Purpura’s work on Islamic expertise led to her interest in the broader connections between knowledge and power—particularly as these played out in the representational practices of museums. After completing a certificate in museum studies at George Washington University, she worked as a research specialist at the National Museum of African Art, where, under the mentorship of curators Christine Mullen Kreamer and Elizabeth Harney, she developed exhibitions, became immersed in African art historiography and worked with contemporary artists on several exhibitions and writing projects. In November 2009, she took up her position as curator of African art at the Krannert Art Museum.

While on a research fellowship at the International Forum for U.S. Studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, I was introduced to Allyson Purpura just a few weeks after *Encounters* first opened to the public in November 2012. I conducted an interview with her at the museum a few days later and then returned in February 2013 for a follow-up discussion. What is most exciting and, I believe, unusual about the installation is the extent to which visitors come to appreciate how these objects have moved in their journeys to the museum, not only across geographic space but also across epistemological categories tied to colonialism and the expansion of empire. In a sense, there is the suggestion that we are all implicated in the histories of these objects. The idea of “encounter” lies at the heart of this exhibition: encounters between objects, encounters between tradition-based art and contemporary artworks through the re-purposing of the former into the latter, and, of course, encounters between the visitors and artworks on view.

## Interview

**Jasmin Habib:** Let’s begin with some general questions about the exhibit. In what ways did your interest in the relationship between power and knowledge, which you’ve been engaged with since you were a graduate student in anthropology, inform the choices you made as curator of this exhibit?

**Allyson Purpura:** I guess my interest in knowledge got me to ask questions about the construction of categories, about interpretation—how African objects have come to be understood within different frameworks of knowledge. Terms like *fetish*, *specimen*, *artifact*, *art*, all reflect different historical moments and configurations of power/knowledge that shape how African objects come to be seen. (That’s why I prefer the term *object*—it’s about as ideology-free as I can get, if that’s even possible!) I find all this very interesting and important, since language informs interpretation (especially on a label!). So, I guess you could say that I am as interested in the politics of display—the interpretive frameworks of exhibitions—as I am in the objects that fill them.

**JH:** Let’s speak about some of these conjunctions. Begin with the contemporary Ethiopian painter Wosene Worke Kosrof’s stunningly beautiful piece, *Migrations II*, and the Ethiopian healing scroll that is located nearby (see Figure 1).

**AP:** Most of Wosene’s work is inspired by the visual plasticity of script—particularly Ge’ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and Amharic, its contemporary descendent. In his paintings, Wosene abstracts the script. He stretches and inverts the letters

to open up new ways to see and think about literacy, migration, the everyday sensorial experiences of life. As an artist who has lived abroad for more than half his life, his paintings are inspired by his memories and impressions over the years of the places that he’s called home, in particular, Ethiopia. In conjunction with his painting, we’ve displayed an Ethiopian healing scroll, dated from around the early 19th century, which we borrowed from the Spurlock Museum, a museum of cultural history on our campus. It is a wonderful scroll, beautifully inscribed by a cleric, or *debtara*, with Ge’ez script, which is imbued with the power to heal. The script has a kind of efficacy in Wosene’s hands, as well as in the hands of the *debtara*. My hope is that visitors will see the visual, historical, even spiritual resonances or dialogues between these two objects. They contextualize each other. On the one hand, we see in the scroll the antecedent or source of the script in Wosene’s painting. On the other hand, scrolls like this are still being made; they live on not only in the patient (in a sense,) but also in the visual vocabulary of Wosene’s practice.

**JH:** These pieces are part of the “Power of Script” section of the exhibit, both prompting us to consider alternative forms of literacy. We really come to appreciate how script refers not just to reading and writing as we conventionally understand it . . . Next to the scroll in the same section are four very colourful paintings of calligraphic script by artist Yelimane Fall. I noticed there was also an interview with him on the iPad that’s been placed in that section. Fall seems a very warm and witty person, as well as quite politically engaged. Could you say something about these works and that interview?

**AP:** Yelimane Fall is a Senegalese artist who also refers to himself as an art activist. He lives in a neighbourhood just outside of Dakar, called Pekine. He works with youth to heal through the art of Arabic calligraphy and what he understands to be the mystical powers embedded in the poetry written by Sheikh Amadou Bamba, a pacifist, anticolonial hero in Senegal and founder of the Mouride mystical brotherhood, which is the most popular form of Islam in Senegal today. Fall was inspired by Bamba in a dream back in the 1980s. In the interview, he recounts his memory of that dream; the video shows him at work in his studio and talking about various other aspects of his work. He also unpacks the mystical power of colours and letters.

**JH:** And did you conduct that interview with him?

**AP:** I prepared the interview questions, but my partner, Jesse Ribot, who has been doing research in Dakar for many years, conducted that interview with him.

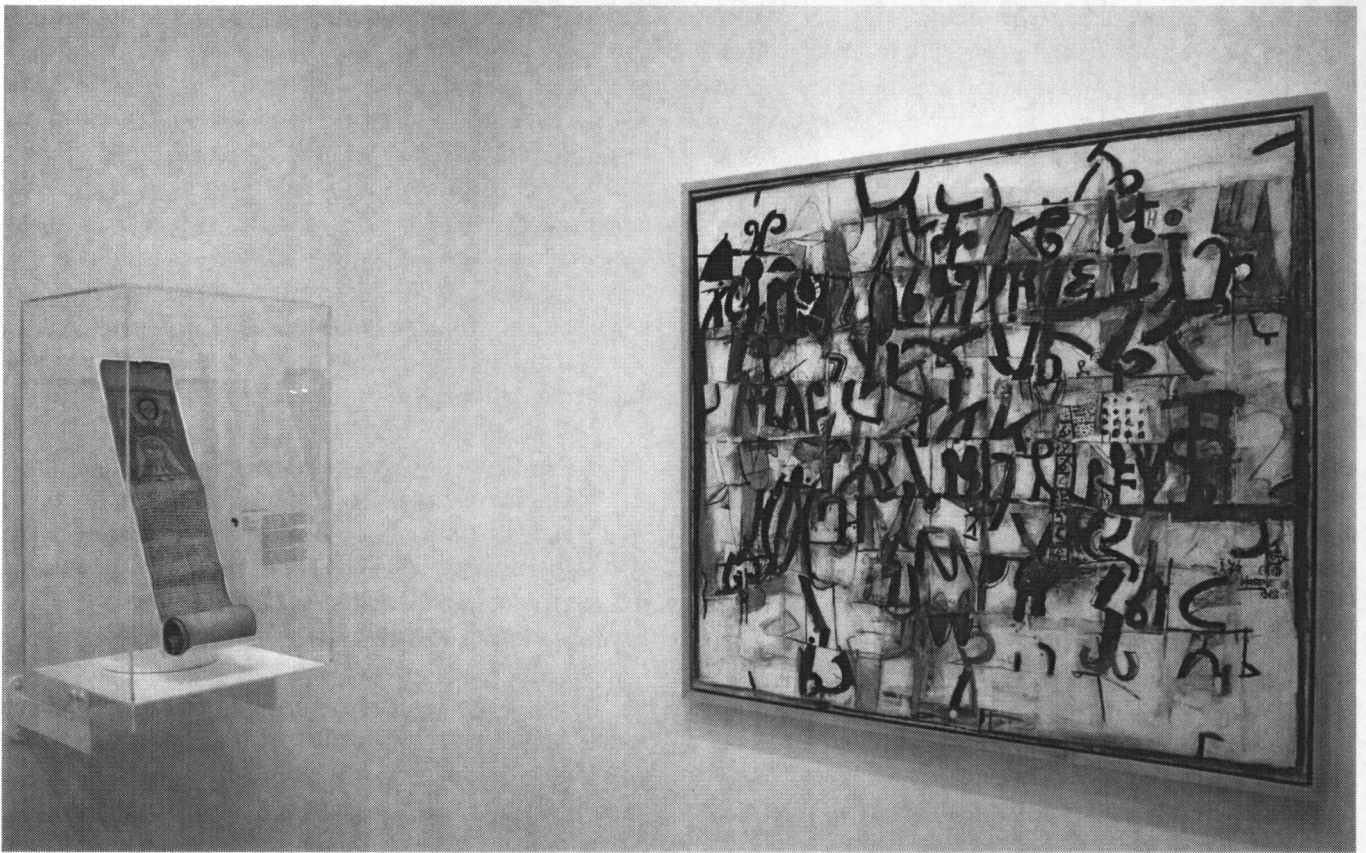


Figure 1: *Encounters: The Arts of Africa (detail)*. Photo courtesy of Krannert Art Museum. At left: healing scroll; pigment and parchment; Ethiopia, ca. 1800. Courtesy Spurlock Museum, 1971.05.0003. At right: Wosene Worke Kosrof, *Migrations II*, 2006. Acrylic on linen, Krannert Art Museum; 2012-6-1.

**JH:** It's marvellous. Fall has such a great sense of humour.

**AP:** Oh, he does! He takes his work seriously but, at the same time, he enjoys speaking to an audience.

**JH:** There is a resonance between contemporary and tradition-based objects throughout the exhibit, as you noted. But, what is it you're trying to do in the "Repurposing Art" section? I'm thinking here about our conversations where you described objects and their "careers" (following Mary Nooter Roberts) or "biographies." Which of the objects do you feel has the most compelling "career" in this section?

**AP:** There's the Dan mask, which is paired with the photograph by Nigerian Yoruba artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who was a key player in the black arts and queer rights movements in the UK, but died an untimely death from AIDS in 1989. Fani-Kayode used a lot of African masks and clothing in his portraiture and tableaux. The photograph we have in the museum is called *Dan Mask*. The Dan are a cultural group that spans Liberia and Sierra Leone. The mask type pictured in the work and that we have on display is iconic, in the

sense that it was collected widely in the west. What we're trying to do in this "Repurposing Art" grouping is to show how objects like a Dan mask can continue to have "careers" *beyond* the museum, that they can "live on" in the work of others. In this photo, Fani-Kayode is holding the mask in a way that seems almost reverential. He was drawn to the spiritual, *transformative* power of these masks, as he put it, and saw photography as his own transformative tool. The artist uses the image to tell stories of his own. Maybe it affirms his identity as an African; maybe it is both a nod to and critique of modernist primitivism as epitomized in the famous photos of Man Ray; either way, Fani-Kayode was defining himself against the many hetero-normative discourses that impacted his life so significantly. In so doing, he radicalizes our ideas about beauty, identity and place.

**JH:** As you know, one of the most complex display contexts is in a museum because meanings may be imposed and the context may delimit the way such objects are read. Were you consciously or purposefully working through some of the relevant critiques raised by museology in the 1990s as you were designing this exhibit?

**AP:** Yes. And the question is how to do that without interfering with the visual appreciation of the object. You don't want to overwhelm people with text; you don't want to overwhelm people with technology; you don't want to hit them over the head with ponderous moral or political messages. On the other hand, I *want* to do all that! By having a section called "Repurposing Art," we try directly, but without a lot of bells and whistles, to talk about how an object continues to have a very complex life in or beyond the museum (as in Fani-Kayode's photo). What I'm trying to say is that I like to try to find ways to open up the critical capacities of these objects. They have the power to undo the very categories that we use to frame them. But it's hard to do that without text, especially for visitors who are really just browsing. I hope we can create some moment of surprise, to grab someone so that they can say or think, "Ah! That mask looks just like the one that guy's using in that photo! I wonder what's going on there?" People can make their own meaning. I like to think I'm directing the narrative, to some extent, but ultimately, that's the beauty of these objects. The whole theme of the exhibit is *encounters*. These are chance encounters, chance meetings and dialogues are [meant to be] open-ended. And we're hoping that they nudge ways of thinking about the object in different sorts of directions.

**JH:** I noted in our tour of the exhibit that you said one of the most aesthetically driven sections is "The Art of Small Things," that these are objects meant to be held or articulated on the human body in some way.

**AP:** Yes, I love small things, and they have a certain grace that really transcends their size.

**JH:** Why don't you take a moment to describe one of the objects, its career or its history and its importance here. Why was it chosen besides its smallness? I found the *shwabti* particularly interesting.

**AP:** Actually, this is a good object to talk about because it is an Egyptian piece. It's important for us ... as the curator of the exhibition, I wanted Egypt to be represented in this gallery. We have very few Egyptian works. This museum's galleries, like many museums still today, are organized by period and by geography. So, we have an ancient Mediterranean installation where you will find several Egyptian objects. But I really wanted to "claim" Egypt for this gallery—even if Africa cannot be "contained" within an arbitrary landmass—given the diaspora and the politics of identity that have been with us for generations—it is still important that Egypt be understood as part of Africa. A *shwabti* is a miniature (about 12 cm) mummy that is buried with the dead in order to assist them on their journey in the

Afterlife. But one of the things I find really interesting about shwabtis is that they are actually meant to substitute for the deceased for any manual labour that he or she is required to perform in the Afterlife, particularly agricultural labour in the "Field of Reeds." This raises questions about production, ideas about labour and hierarchy, all contained within this one compelling object. That was the piece of the story that I wanted to tell on this very short label here. The shwabti is also quite beautiful; its turquoise faience colour just pops against the white walls and against the carved wooden objects that are its companions on view.

**JH:** When we begin to explore representations of traumatic encounters, we may find ourselves uncomfortably trying to maintain two postures at once. On the one hand, understanding the violence of colonialism, while also appreciating the beauty of the object. That's what I thought about as I wandered through the exhibit and read the labels you had written

**AP:** Oh, that's wonderful that you see that!

**JH:** In some cases, there's the history of this object, what we can make of this history or what we've *learned* about this history. The historical photos and labels describing how the objects may have been used or removed from these communities were particularly interesting. Another issue related to "encounters" that I think you've developed in the exhibit is the *trauma* of such encounters: of histories torn asunder. I wonder if you could speak to this, especially in relation to the fact that you know, given your training, that many such objects are stolen or they have "careers" we don't know very much about.

**AP:** Well, there were many different drafts in thinking about how to deal with this in the gallery, that's for sure. I always kept coming back to what it was I wanted visitors to understand about the object. I think these works are visually strong, and they're powerful and interesting in terms of their own stories, but there's more to them than what meets the eye, so to speak. There are the conditions of trade and how an object exited the continent. But to get back to the main question really ... What *can* you say when so many of our objects have very short or no provenance records at all ... So I have to ask, What can I really say about them? We don't know where our donors got most of these objects. We might know the dealer, but from that point on we don't know anything.

**JH:** Right. But you're very clear about this in the section on "Fraught Histories."

**AP:** Yes. Since there was no way to talk about provenance with any specificity for all of the objects, I decided

to focus on object types that we know, in the museum and cultural heritage worlds, to have been illegally excavated and traded illicitly. For instance, with the Benin hip mask, we don't know if that exact object was booty from the infamous Punitive Expedition in 1897, but what we can do with that object is tell the story of this "fraught history." We're currently doing some provenance research on that hip mask. According to the notes written by African art historian William Fagg, who advised the donor, Richard Faletti, in many of his purchases, it was likely made in the mid-18th century. Faletti acquired the object from a New York dealer, who in turn bought it from another collector, whom I have been trying to reach to learn where he got the piece. The story of the Punitive Expedition is an important story to share with our audiences and to show that 21st-century museums are thinking critically and ethically about their collection and display practices. With the UNESCO Convention of 1970 and the Cultural Property Implementation Act of 1984 and the numerous Memoranda of Understanding that are being created between so-called art source countries and museums, museums are functioning in a new world of ownership politics and emerging legislation. We all need to develop protocol for best practices. I've had many conversations with our director about this. We do have two Djenne terra cotta figures from Mali, and we have a Nok terra cotta head fragment from Nigeria, and then the Benin bronze hip mask from Nigeria. We know objects like these have histories of plunder and rapacious market forces pulling them illegally out of the country. So while we continue to do what detective work we can on our own objects, we don't want them languishing in storage—particularly as a university museum—we want them out on view to "tell" these stories and maybe even spur interest in research. So, museums continue to grapple with what's most ethical; there are conferences, symposia, guidelines that have been drafted and updated. What's best for the object? For our visitors? Do we repatriate? Develop bilateral agreements with art source countries? Do we negotiate long-term loans to keep things on display but transfer title to their countries of origin? Do we keep them and tell the stories ourselves? Though I curated the installation, I've been talking with colleagues about these things and seeking direction, feedback on objects, for *years!*

The difficulty comes when you're trying to acknowledge everybody, all those conversations. It gets to be so you can't name 30-plus people in a wall text! African art historians in my experience are a very generous crowd.

**JH:** We've talked about the intellectual, scholarly, curatorial and museum community. But what about the

local community? The African or African American community? I was at an "Election 2012" event [for Obama's second term] in the museum last night where ... there was a nod to this exhibit ... but before that there was an interesting statement made by a local radio personality and community organizer, Carol Ammons, who asserted that this university doesn't fully respond to the African American community's needs, that the community needs to ask the university to do more. So I wondered to what extent the community has been involved in the development as well as promotion of this exhibit. It seems like they're very supportive. Did they have a hand in it? Did you speak to them before you finalized the design? What was their role, if any? I also ask because, as you well know, there have been several quite contentious exhibits<sup>1</sup> in Canada, both "Into the Heart of Africa" and, before that, "The Spirit Sings." There has been a kind of a reckoning, if you will, though there is a very long way to go. Could you share your own experience in relation to these comments, as well as how your own way into this exhibit might have been informed by the experiences others.

**AP:** Hmm ... yes, that's a great question. I'll never forget one thing that Enid Schildkrout [long-time curator at the American Museum of Natural History and chief curator at the Museum for African Art in New York] said in a review she wrote about Jeanne Cannizzo's *Into the Heart of Africa* [see Schildkrout 1991]. She implied that what happened to Jeanne Cannizzo could happen to any curator who is not aware of her community, audience, institution. In terms of racial politics, sadly I'm not sure we're so far ahead from those days. But that was a lesson. What she was trying to do intellectually was really interesting, relying on ironic strategies, which, as Schildkrout argues, might not have been as unsuccessful had it been in an art museum or a small university museum with a very targeted, focused audience.

But, you asked about my own experience. The ROM story was in my mind when I was charged with this reinstallation project. I first had to figure out what I wanted to do. I wanted to provide a kind of social history or biography of the objects, to show that objects can tell stories beyond themselves and that those stories might be fraught. It was a more historiographical approach (kind of like Cannizzo's!), but I didn't want to lose sight of the objects. I also wanted to speak with people on campus about how they felt about the reinstallation. I turned first to the African Students Organization on campus, thinking there might be interest. We organized a small focus group, and I shared with them my working themes at that time. It was a very interesting and helpful discussion, and I incorporated their feedback into the

overall installation concept. To sum up their responses, they wanted to stress the contemporaneity and resiliency of African art traditions. But what struck me the most, if I can try to put it briefly, were their thoughts on why there was not a lot of interest in traditional arts among African students on campus—that these arts didn't necessarily connect with their own experiences growing up in Africa and their feelings about these objects and museums generally are actually pretty ambivalent. Thanks mostly to Anne Lutomia, one of the grad students in the focus group, these issues ended up inspiring some of the public programming we organized around the time of the reinstallation's opening. Long story short, it couldn't have happened without Anne and Sam Smith, the engagement coordinator at Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on campus. We organized a gallery conversation, which was held here just last week, called "Creating Community Through African Art." The idea for that event percolated up through my conversations with Anne and another grad student in social work, Mabinty Tarawallie. They wanted to use the gallery to talk about perceptions and misperceptions of being African in this country, especially to open up conversations between African, first-generation African and African American students. One of the things Anne talked about (Anne is Kenyan and has been in this country for probably about 10 years) was how her sense of self as an African changed when she got to the United States. She was very passionate about opening up discussion with other Africans and African Americans. "Why is it that traditional arts are still seen as 'primitive' or 'backward'?" So, her part of the gallery conversation addressed these issues and her own grappling with identity; she did that by referring to a sculpture on view—well, really to its maker, the Kenyan-born artist Magdalene Odundo, now living in London—with whom Anne really identified. And then there was Mabinty, who came to the States from Sierra Leone when she was about 10 years old. She talked about how being in a gallery devoted to African art made her feel like she "had a place here," as she put it; it made her think about her mother and her mother's connection to the Sande initiation society. The Sande society performs a dance using a *sowei* or *bundu* mask, like one we have in the installation, and even though Mabinty said she knew nothing about this mask, *her Mom* did. She talked about her experience as a child in the [United States], how kids reacted to her being African, and said how important it is for her own two children to grow up without prejudice. For Mabinty, art is one way to do that. Sam Smith, who I just mentioned, was the third person in the gallery conversation. He used the Wosene Kosrof

painting to talk about how his consciousness about being connected to Africa came later in life—thinking back on the uses of heritage in the African American community in the 1960s, about the Black Power movement and the emergence of Kwanzaa—that a lot of this was inspired by an Africa "of the imagination," as he put it. So, with those three voices, we had our first public gallery conversation. It was well attended, mostly students . . . But how do you sustain it? This is always the challenge. So we (as a museum) wanted to say, "Hey, we'd love to host African musical performances, yes, but also want to support intellectual and cultural debate and to be a resource for community building.

**JH:** Speaking of the space itself, could you say something about the design of the exhibit? It had a very open feeling. In fact, I found it strikingly modern. Less "museum-like" than I expected or am accustomed to (see Figure 2). Was that intentional?

**AP:** Yes. We were very fortunate to have the architectural design firm Rice+Lipka working with us on this exhibition. Lyn Rice really wanted to depart from the standard pedestal cases or large wall cabinets typically seen in museums. So they came up with the idea to create four table displays that are cantilevered . . . so you have a sense that they're floating. They're also laid out in a pinwheel formation. On one side, the bases are dark grey, on the other side, they're white. The vitrines are really large and spacious and don't crowd the artworks. Actually when I first saw them being installed, they reminded me more of an aquarium! There are also wall treatments along the perimeter of the gallery.

The layout creates different viewing experiences and sight lines. And you can see the objects in the cases from all angles! Lyn chose white, powder-coated steel, wafer-thin but extremely strong shelves to support the objects. We don't have a lot of colour because we wanted the objects to really stand out. The wall vitrines are not entirely sealed, but instead they kind of float over the shelves. This also gives viewers a sense of openness. Our labels also have little tiny Africa maps on them. There are no political divisions on the maps. They're just black silhouettes to give visitors a quick visual reference; for example, there's a little white dot where Egypt is for the shwabti, just to give a sense of where on the continent an object originated. Or, for the diasporic objects, in the Caribbean basin or Cuba or Brazil.

**JH:** One of the things that strikes me about our conversations and the exhibit itself is that "diaspora," or the relationship of diasporic artists to African objects and art, is not raised in any direct way, although it clearly informs and helps to frame the entire display. Could you say something about that?



Figure 2: *Encounters: The Arts of Africa* installation view. Photo by Chris Brown. Courtesy Krannert Art Museum.

AP: Sure. That was an important theme that was represented in the African gallery exhibit before I got here. That exhibit was curated by art history professor Dana Rush and her students. Dana is a specialist on Vodun visual arts in Benin, and also transatlantic Vodou, so she included a section in the exhibition she called “Transatlantic Yoruba.” I really wanted to preserve that when I reinstalled the gallery. I knew from talking with Dana and with her students that this was an important subject to them. Of course, “diaspora” informs so much of our thinking about the continent and the global south generally; so, with the re-installation, we preserved it in several ways. One way is in a section called, “*Orisha: Yoruba Art, Spirit and Diaspora*,” which is based on Dana Rush’s initial installation. This section focuses on the *orisha*, the pantheon of spirits that accompanied their captive Yoruba devotees across the Atlantic. The Yoruba objects displayed here all relate to various *orisha*. We also have two diasporic objects: the *penca de balangandās* and the beaded Lucumi Chango dance wand. The *penca de balangandās* (Portuguese for “bundle of charms”) is something that Afro-

Brazilian women wore at their waist or wrist or hung on the wall inside their homes. We don’t know much about these objects. They were worn by slaves, ex-slaves and market women as an emblem of identity but also as kind of a protective amulet; because of their connection to the *orisha*, they brought protective power. They also have to do with women’s labour and women’s work. For example, for the market woman, you see this object has gourd-vessels and fruits (see Figure 3).

The metal might also be associated with Ogun ... an *orisha* associated with iron, hunting and warfare. He is thought to bring good luck to vendors. Who made these objects? Some sources say they are associated with African Muslim metal smiths brought to Brazil as slaves. So, there are many layers of meanings associated with this object. Its self-referential diasporic element is represented by the two birds facing one another, one representing Brazil, the other the African continent, according to Brazilian scholar Raul Lody. But nearly all the research I found on these objects is written in Portuguese, so I’ve asked several colleagues for assistance with translations.



Figure 3: *Penca de balangandās*, early 20th century. Wood, tin, nickel silver. Private collection. Photo courtesy Krannert Art Museum.

And Magdelene Odundo, the contemporary Kenyan-born ceramic artist I mentioned earlier, has lived in the UK for many years. She's not someone whose work should be displayed only in an African gallery. In fact, the identity-driven market of contemporary art is troubling because many artists who are African or Native American or Oceanic or Latin American who are working in the global contemporary art scene tend to be pigeonholed by virtue of their place of birth. It's very frustrating and it's very limiting for them. But, that said, we included Odundo's ceramic vessel in the "Reading the Body" section of the gallery. Though it is an abstract form, it is also figural or "gestural," as she would say, and really quotes the female body. Also, her ceramic art challenges conventional distinctions between "craft" and "art," "traditional" and "contemporary." She's an artist who draws on generations of traditions of hand-built vessels. It makes us rethink how we categorize not just the work but the artist, too. Thanks to the Fowler Museum we have a videotaped interview with Odundo by Marla Berns on one of our gallery iPads.

**JH:** Yes, certainly one of the most exciting things about the exhibition is the inclusion [on an iPad video] of Nora Chipaumire's work as a dancer.

**AP:** Nora Chipaumire is from Zimbabwe, currently living in Brooklyn. I met Nora when she was an artist-in-residence here last year and involved in a project at KAM called "Open Studio" that was organized by Tumelo Mosaka, then-curator of contemporary art here. Nora performed several of her dances here. We taped those performances and then we interviewed her. Based on some of the discussions that we had been having just sitting around, I thought, "Wow, the things that she's raising about her art speak to the very issues we're trying to grapple with in the exhibition." So I asked her, "How would you feel if we included your dance in the installation? It is, after all, a bunch of objects. I mean, how do you feel about that?" To quote her directly, she replied, "But dance *is* a visual art!" Also, when people think "African," they expect traditional dance and masquerade. So Chipaumire's dance offers up something different. It emerges from her history as a colonial subject, a liberated subject. and as someone in self-exile, given the current politics in Zimbabwe. She thought having the video in the gallery could only promote both the art and her own work in ways that haven't really been done that much in museums. We were really, really delighted to have had her permission to do so. Her video is placed in the "Reading the Body" section since, as she says in her piece, her work is about the "politics of the dancing body."

**JH:** What of the displays of the *Chi Wara*?

**AP:** Well, we have a wonderful horizontal *Chi Wara* headdress on view. A *Chi Wara* is a mythical creature that taught the Bamana people (of Mali) to farm. But we also have a *Chi Wara* by American artist Willie Cole, assembled from used bicycle parts. As a young man, Cole was very inspired by African art. And, as he puts it himself [see Sims 2007], as a boy he used to salvage things. He'd bring things home and he would build objects out of these found materials. Of course now, recycling and salvaging is a very popular practice in the arts. It's another idea of repurposing. Cole made several bicycle *chi waras* (or *tji waras*, as he uses an older spelling of the term.) They're whimsical, for sure, but he's also saying a lot with these works—about consumer culture in America, the all too easy disposability of things here—plus bicycles are one of the most popular, accessible forms of everyday transportation in Africa—in much of the world, for that matter. We're fortunate to have this piece on loan from the University of Wyoming



Art Museum. The relationship between these two works is wonderful. Visitors have really enjoyed them.

**JH:** Could you say something about the powerful section called “The Creativity of Power”?

**AP:** “The Creativity of Power” is a section where we have *minikisi*, or power figures, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We’re especially grateful for the loan of a fabulous Kongo *nkisi* from the Stanley Collection at the University of Iowa. We also have objects that relate to (Yoruba) Ifa divination. So, how do Ifa divination and power figures connect? The idea of the “creativity of power” is that knowledge is embodied in these objects, which can, through the agency of a diviner or healer, make things happen in the world.

**JH:** Doesn’t this take us right back to your work in Zanzibar?

**AP:** Yes, it does! But as with other approaches taken in this reinstallation, I was also informed by the work of scholars such as Alfred Gell, Wyatt MacGaffey and Polly Nooter Roberts, all of whom have written beautifully about the mediating role of art in life.

**JH:** Given the criticisms leveled at museums (art or ethnographic) these days, it is clear that curators such as yourself are now situated in the unique but also interesting position of making the connection between power and knowledge as encountered in objects fraught with complex histories and meanings. By narrating such encounters—some emerging out of direct violence, others colonial and therefore systemically violent—you ensure that visitors are exposed to the process by which some objects have come into the possession of this and other museums and galleries. You seem also to allow for the visitor to deconstruct such mis/representations. The emplacement and techniques of display you have chosen reveal not only the complex relationship between artistic expression and the colonial encounter but also the importance of art and especially the role of the contemporary artist, as well as the resilience of communities responding to such encounters. Thank you again for your time. It really is a terrific display, one that I will want to return to!

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## Notes

- 1 The “Out of Africa” exhibit opened at the Royal Ontario Museum at a complicated moment in Toronto’s history. The racist brutality of the Toronto Police Services had been uncovered and exposed by local activists, academics and journalists. At the same time, there was some expectation that the museum’s collection was going to “celebrate” African art. But many of the visitors coming to the exhibit saw labels that did not match their sense of identity, history or community. This was especially true for Canadians of African descent, the so-called stakeholder audience, who were not invited to get involved until very late in the process. “The Spirit Sings” exhibit at the Glenbow Museum—featuring many indigenous artifacts, some of them stolen—opened to coincide with the 1988 Winter Olympics being hosted by Calgary, Alberta. At the time, the Lubicon Lake Cree were making demands that the federal government recognize their right to reserve territory, as well as for a share in the wealth that had flowed from oil drilling on their territories. Their efforts, under the leadership of Bernard Ominyak, led to calls for a boycotting of the Olympics around the world, but especially in Europe. The exhibit itself also became the target of criticism when First Nations claimed that some of the masks used in the exhibit were sacred and should never have been put on the display. All of these experiences led to some changes in the practices of curating, exhibiting and storing art and artifacts across Canada—and for critical museology in general.

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