

OPEN PANELS AND ROUNDTABLES

Decolonization of African Art in Museums, Covid-19, and Curating Art in Digital Space

Chair: Sule James, Dr, Wake Forest University

The field of museum representation of African art have encountered challenges with curating certain African forms since Africanists began the campaign for the repatriation of African art that were looted from different countries on the continent. That the move is aimed at decolonizing African art in Western museums is important in addressing the wrongs of colonialists. This is however redefining the changing space of curating such African art in museum collections, as efforts are made to reimagining those art as virtual objects or digital images in digital spaces. Similarly, when Covid-19 began spreading across countries globally in 2020, some institutions were forced to reconsider the digital space as suitable alternatives for artists and curators to curate exhibitions of African art. These developments have received little research contributions on how decolonization and covid-19 changed the narratives of past, present, and future of curation of African art in museum exhibitions, galleries, and institutions from physical to digital spaces. This is significant not merely because the mode of curation is being redefined but how artworks are being redefined from tangible to digital images. While these modes of disseminating art are aimed at still promoting exhibitions despite the decolonial turn and Covid-19, they highlight attempts to continually engage the public through different thematic thrusts that educate and communicate ideas beyond the physical spaces, as the digital spaces blur the borders of the immediate environment where such art are curated. To this end, the audience participating or viewing such digital exhibitions are within the global context because of access to the digital space. This panel is interested in research and papers that provide insights on the use of digital spaces in curating and disseminating African art or their digital images in museums, gallery exhibitions and other institutions.

Public Art, African Histories: Asserting and Subverting Colonial Power

Chair: Victoria Rovine, Professor, Dept of Art and Art History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This panel will explore the histories, forms, and afterlives of colonial-era public art, both in Africa and in European centers of imperial power in Africa. We also invite papers on postcolonial public art in Africa that reassesses or subverts imperial histories. Our aim is to address public art in all its forms—from its “classical” manifestations as statues, murals, fountains, and the like, to performances, filmic projections, and virtual reality technologies. We seek to deepen appreciation for the impact of public art in empire and its aftermath, as a means of asserting power and shaping popular conceptions of histories and heritage, and as an instrument of resistance to these constructions of history and hierarchy.

Numerous Africanist art historians have offered incisive analyses of the artistry and impacts of colonial as well as postcolonial public art in Africa that engages the colonial past (notable among these: Miller and Schmahmann’s volume on public art in South Africa, Çelik on public statuary in Algiers, Arnoldi on Mali’s postcolonial monument program, and Malaquais on contemporary public arts in Cameroon and DRC). This panel aims to take a broader view that brings into dialogue case studies from Africa, African representations in European public art of the colonial era, and contemporary engagements with public art as colonial tactic. This is a prime moment for a wide view of public art and colonial empire. The past decade in the United States and Europe—and in some parts of Africa—has seen public art gain prominence as communities reject its projections of invented pasts. The explosive debates that have accompanied nearly every such rejection, every removal of a monument, reveal the tenacity of their impact, and the necessity of art historical examination of the forms that bear oppressive imperial imaginaries.

Sea Matters: New Art Histories from Africa’s Islands and Archipelagos

Chair: Prita Meier, Associate Professor, Institute of Fine Arts and Department of Art History, New York University

The archipelagos and islands of the African continent are spaces of intercultural encounter and contestation, where life is shaped by long histories of transoceanic exchange, migration and empire-making. The diverse societies of Africa’s Atlantic seaboard and its Indian Ocean and Mediterranean littorals continue to cultivate overseas connections and maritime livelihoods. Africa’s port cities, including Dakar, Lomé, Luanda, Casablanca, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Benin, and Accra, are vanguard sites of globalization. Marine environments and ecosystems are not only key resources sustaining local livelihoods, but they are a

multisensorial presence that inspire artists, patrons, performers and builders in myriad ways. Many of archipelagic Africa's material cultures and built environment are crafted of oceanic materials, including sand, cowrie shells, coral stone, and mangrove poles. Further, long-coveted imported materials—which were used to make some of Africa's most iconic artworks, arrived via seaborne trade.

This panel calls for contributions that consider the significance of archipelagos and maritime environments in the arts and building cultures of Africa. Papers can focus on seabound cultural production, mercantile spaces, maritime infrastructures, or oceanic expressive forms, among other topics. Papers with a strong analytical framework, drawing on archipelagic thinking or the oceanic humanities, are especially welcome. What would it mean to focus on seagoing vessels or “below the water line” in Africanist art history? What comes into analytic view when we think of Indian Ocean littorals or Atlantic islands as African peripheries (as opposed to continuing to focus on undoing colonialist representations of Africa as peripheral to Euro-American phenomena)? How do the arts and material cultures of archipelagos and port cities exceed prevailing definitions of Africanness? How do ideas of indigeneity work on islands where everyone is of immigrant origin or in port cities where people trace their heritage not only to Africa, but to overseas societies?

While archipelagos can be celebrated for an openness to others and transcultural connectivity, they are also shaped by violence and inequality. There is no African port city or island that is not touched by slavery, racism and colonization. What role do the arts and built environments play in these histories? What comes into analytical view if we center the fact that many vanguard art movements, including strands of Black internationalism, took shape in port cities? What role do the properties of waves, sea surfaces or sea floors play in the arts of Africa?

New Directions in Provenance Research

Chair: Allison J. Martino, PhD, Laura and Raymond Wielgus Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and Indigenous Art of the Americas, Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University

This panel will address current and recent work among scholars and curators who are exploring new ways of pursuing provenance research on historical African arts. It is especially interested in strategies that consider the potential of research methodology to include collaboration and radical listening to strengthen understandings of ownership among communities of origin. Most often, documented ownership of African artworks in collections located in the Global North centers on European and American owners. This absence grew out of colonial-era collecting practices, in which Europeans did not usually record prior owners in Africa. How might we shift this prior emphasis and address this erasure to acknowledge the artworks' important prior ownership in the African continent?

Provenance records usually focus on what is documented through written records. This panel will consider how we could rethink approaches to provenance research that could also acknowledge the gaps of what we do not know about prior ownership. What might a human-centered approach to provenance research look like and how could it enhance our understanding of an artwork's provenance? In what ways could it inform how we assess archival records during provenance research? How could provenance researchers incorporate engagement with descendants from communities of origin alongside archival research? How can museums mentor and train the next generation of scholars in how to pursue provenance research on historical African art collections? This panel invites paper topics that consider these questions.

Provenance research is a critical topic in the field of African arts, and also the broader museum world today, especially through calls for restitution and repatriation of artworks that were previously acquired unethically during the colonial period. This panel invites proposals for presentations that could address the role of collaboration, knowledge production, transparency and ethics, listening, or mentorship in provenance research on African artworks. Scope is open to provenance research on historical arts from any time period or part of the African continent. Inviting presentations on these topics seeks to contribute to this broader discussion and new scholarship on provenance research in African arts.

This proposal grows out of my current provenance research with historical African arts. In 2022, I began a provenance research project for the Art of Africa, Oceania, and Indigenous Art of the Americas collection at the Eskenazi Museum of Art, located at Indiana University. A few graduate students have been working with me on this project, as it is important for me to mentor students in provenance research given its

increasing importance in the field today and my position at an academic art museum. Through this research, I have become especially interested in exploring new strategies for provenance record formats to recognize unidentified owners from the cultures of origin—a topic that I look forward to discussing during the panel.

Ìyá: Our Mothers Who Art In Exile

Co-Chairs: Moyo Okediji, Professor of art history, Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas, Austin
Bolaji Campbell, Professor of African and African Diaspora Art, Department of Theory and History of Art, Rhode Island School of Design

The panel explore strategies for negotiating the conditions of our Ìyá in forced exile and detention in Western captivity.

In 2010, the Nigerian artist, Tola Wewe, did a series of “magical paintings” to assist in the return of his nonagenarian mother who was abducted by kidnappers from her home in Shabome, in the creeks of southwest Nigeria. The art magic worked: her abductors were apprehended and brought to justice, and she was rescued and returned.

Wewe’s magic, however, has not worked for the return of the ancestral mothers kidnapped, bought or trafficked out of Yoruba country in the era of slavery along the Transatlantic routes, or during the colonial subjugation of Africa.

There are two types of mothers trafficked out of Africa: the human and the images. While the human mothers have fought and gained their emancipation, the imagistic mothers remain in bondage outside Africa.

How are Yoruba images mother? They are iyá.

Ìyá means mother. Ìyá, on the metaphorical level, also refers to Yoruba images. The root verb is yá, meaning create, draw, produce, craft, make, generate, fashion, build, construct, invent, and birth.

The Yoruba “objects” in Western museums and galleries are therefore the Iyá or mothers of the “contemporary” art forms by Yoruba artists such as Wewe, Agboola Folarin and Muraina Oyelami. The Yoruba Ona Art Movement and the Oshogbo schools are, therefore, the Ọmọ or children of the Ìyá.

Are these Ìyá figures happy where they are currently exiled in captivity? A museum conservator reported that one of them, Ọgọ Èṣù Èlégbára, was angrily causing chaos in the storage where she is kept. The museum reached out to some African art historians to discuss ways of making the Ìyá happy in captivity.

This panel is born out of the ongoing discussions to negotiate the happiness and wellbeing of the Ìyá figures in or out of captivity.

Discussions will explore the circumstances surrounding the trafficking of these mothers, the situations of their current dislocation, their alienation within the global art market, and their integrity as ideas beyond just “art” as perceived in the West.

Many Yoruba artists, cultural luminaries and scholars in Africa and its diasporas are worried and dismayed when they see or contemplate these mothers caged in Western holds. The panel brings some of them together to ask questions, complicate, and provide answers to various queries such as: Should we seek the “return of our mothers,” à la Wewe model? If so, how do we initiate such a venture? How do we persuade the current holders of these mothers to release them? Where do they go when they are released? What are the complexities and convolutions created by the continuous retention of these Iya figures in their situations of exile, captivity and banishment out of their original homes in Yorubaland? Discussants will present formal papers and informal notes to sòrò sókè on these matters, not so much to resolve the questions, but to provide a forum for generating further negotiations.

Online Visual Imaginations of the Nation

Chair: Okechukwu Nwafor, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, USA.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1983), Edward Said suggested how images are involved in the production and contestation of national identities and how nations are not natural or fixed entities but rather historical and cultural constructions that are influenced by imperialism. This panel intends to stimulate thoughts about the role of online visual culture in the making of nations. Building on “the idea of nation” as “an imagining” and drawing upon Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of an “imagined community” the panel invites papers that would radically (re)conceptualize Anderson’s (1983:9) argument that a nation is imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” In recent times, artists, photographers, online visual activists, cartoonists, AI generators, among others, have reconstituted the concept of the nation through their profound online visual engagements. Online forums seem to be the new epicenter of intense visual warfare. They are premises where a new revolutionary citizenry is constituted. We invite scholars to engage this interesting and influential aspect of everyday life. Just like Anderson’s maps act as institutions of colonial and postcolonial state formations of power, we invite scholars to reflect on how online visual culture can profoundly shape the nature of collective aspirations, especially the way in which ordinary citizens imagine their geographic, political, religious, social and cultural spaces online. We invite contributions that explore how online visual practices can facilitate the emergence of alternative modes of national belonging in a world constituted by imagined communities (Edensor, 2002:39), where the temporal and the spatial dimensions of national identity are inextricably intertwined (Cubitt, 1998:13), and where the national landscapes are imbued with ideological and affective significations (Short, 1991).

Periodizing the 1990s

Chair: Álvaro Luís Lima, Assistant Professor, University of Florida

The 1990s were a defining decade for African art and art history. The popularization of African biennials, major survey exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe, and the founding of specialized journals became successful means of raising the interest of global audiences in contemporary African art and solidifying it as a field of study. Artists from across the continent came under the influence of workshops and artistic residencies—notably those organized by the Triangle Network—that encouraged the expansion of mixed techniques, the use of found materials, and the exploration of non-objective form. Performance and time-based media gained momentum alongside thematic interests such as sexual difference, memory, and the diasporic condition. The panel considers themes, movements, and figures that have characterized the 1990s in African art and art history.

Whereas the decade witnessed bustling artistic and intellectual experimentation, these developments should be critically analyzed in relation to the post-Cold War ideological framework from which they emerged. The end of socialist governments, the impacts of structural adjustment programs across the continent, the disillusionment with the shortcomings of the new South Africa, and the challenges in African democracies marked a new organization of power under neoliberalism. So caustic were the impacts of these transformations that Marxist historian John Saul described them as a process of “recolonization” of Africa. How should the developments and reception of African art and art history from the period be situated among these political and economic changes? What role did art and art history play in this new organization of power under the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism? The panel considers case studies and methods to contextualize the production and reception of 1990s African art and art history as agent and expression of the decade’s political and economic turn.

Papers might include a wide array of topics on the period:

- New and revived artistic practices
- Methodologies, theories, and concepts developed by or popular among Africanists
- Global reception of African art and visual culture
- Establishment of new institutions and private collections
- Cultural policy
- Exhibitions and biennials (i.e., Africa Explores, Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, In/Sight: African Photographers, first and second Johannesburg Biennales, Dak’art, and Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie)
- Art journals (i.e., *Revue Noire* and *Nka*)

Traditions and practices of profanation at Western Museums

Chair: Murielle Sandra Tiako Djomatchoua, Princeton University

The ethical implications surrounding the classification, conservation, and exhibition of non-Western objects, particularly African arts and artifacts, give rise to critical questions regarding the nature and functions of museum practices. This panel will explore the role of the African arts museum catalog in shaping the understanding of these objects, the responsibilities of museums as “hosts”, and the methods employed in handling these artifacts. Drawing attention to the perpetuation of profanation, this panel will examine the extent to which museum traditions contribute to this phenomenon, with a focus on Western museums potentially becoming modern “shrines” for African arts.

The interconnection between conservation and profanation, particularly in Universal museums, is analyzed through four key perspectives: the cataloging and naming process, the allocation of objects within the museum's space (including storage and exhibitions), the protocols for handling objects, and the use of unethical visualization practices. Central to these issues is the influence of the (re)production of the colonial gaze within cultural institutions. This gaze manifests in the subjective and arrogant organization of collections and storage spaces, where sacred objects, items of prestige, and domestic artifacts are often amalgamated based on colonial perspectives and Western beauty criteria.

Despite ongoing debates on restitution, numerous objects housed in museums continue to endure a state of exile. This unfortunate circumstance results in a profound disconnection between museums and the source communities to which these objects belong. For these communities, these artifacts represent integral elements of spirituality and identity. This panel underscores the urgency of addressing these complex dynamics, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and respectful approaches in the curation and presentation of non-Western cultural heritage. The discussion will contribute to a thorough discussions on profanation as related to museum traditions and practices”.

For what is Just: Social Practice Art, Solidarity and Civic Imagination in Africa

Chair: Nomusa Makhubu, Associate Professor, University of Cape Town

The arts are notorious for elitism, bourgeois individualism and competition. In general, art practitioners and organizations compete for dwindling resources. In many African contexts, there is a marked difference between deficient public resources and affluent privately funded institutions on which artists depend. There's a general lack of the political appetite to develop progressive policy for the arts. In this context, solidarity – civic, social, cultural, or political – among organizations and practitioners has become vital in understanding social practice art, which encompasses itinerant, collaborative, participatory and activist art that is primarily geared towards social justice. Solidarity is both cooperative and agonistic. Feminist scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 7) defines it in terms of “mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities”. In this way, solidarity can be understood as affiliative politics in the struggle for rights and resources. It is important, therefore, to draw attention to the shifting paradigms of “civic engagement” and “public participation”. Reflecting on art collectives, art movements and civil society organizations which focus on intra-Africa collaboration, we ask: what are the forms of solidarity, whether lacking or in practice, demanded of art organizations, institutions, and art practitioners in the current context?

Attending to social justice, social practice art casts a light on the precarity of justice and how compartmentalised political arrangements of “society” encumber civic imagination. How, in Africa's urban and peri-urban contexts, are the commons or public spaces shaped? Hannah Arendt's (1998: 199) notion of “spaces of appearance” foregrounds public appearance and visibility bear the potential for dignity, which in oppressive conditions is crucial for collective action. A space of appearance is the “creation of a common world of seeing and being seen by others” which “transcends our life-span into past and future alike; one which was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us” (Arendt 1998: 55). Drawing from Arendt, Ariella Azoulay (2012: 234) also makes a case for “civic imagination” as a “tool for reading the possible within the concrete.” The objective of the panel is to consider how social practice art potentiates equitable reformulations of the civic and the public. We also draw from Emeka Okereke's concept of trans-Africanism, focussing on grassroots artistic intervention. As Okereke puts it, “the prefix ‘Trans-‘ connotes ‘going beyond’, ‘transcending’, and in some cases implies a thorough change”. While it is about change (transformation), between (transit), conversion, passage and adaptation (transition) or temporariness (transitory), it is also about the inevitable political antagonisms in pursuit of justice. Trans-African, refers to space, time and the body, the three main loci of

colonial theft. It is transcending the new insidious forms of colonialism in the theft of bodies (exploited labour), theft of space (land dispossession) and theft of time. It situates movement and communing towards transborder solidarity.

Interventions in the Colonial Photographic Archive

Chair: Aimée Bessire, Independent Scholar

As Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley have argued: “Photographs... have a great capacity to overturn unified, linear, and chronological ways of thinking and open new analytical spaces.” This panel invites papers that offer critical explorations of the interpretive and interventionist possibilities in the colonial photographic archive. Elizabeth Edwards has highlighted the “dense multidimensional fluidity of the discursive practices of photographs... linking objects between past and present, between visible and invisible and active in cross-cultural negotiation.” This notion—of the active, discursive possibilities of photographs to create cross-cultural connections across time—empowers the photograph to be “undisciplined,” to borrow Christina Sharpe’s terminology. It empowers the viewer’s understanding of the image with the potential to dismantle fixed ways of seeing and rewrite dominant narratives. What stories are told by historic photographs? How can contemporary viewing rewrite the colonial narrative?

The work of such artists as Santu Mofokeng, Sammy Baloji, and Emmanuel Iduma, among many others, offer critical perspectives giving definition to the “multidimensional fluidity” possible in the photographic archive, and perhaps most importantly, offering new ways of understanding historic visual records. In writing about his own work reenvisioning the colonial archive, Iduma has suggested, “I am looking at the remains of those who have passed into history.” Through his poetic writing in *A Stranger’s Pose*, Iduma ascribes new meanings to historic images. His reimagining offers an empowering approach to photographs—dismantling colonial frameworks and privileging personal rewritings of history.

Panel papers may focus on analyses of African artists who are reenvisioning colonial photographs through creative practice; analyses of African writers ascribing new voices to colonial images; or investigations of new methodologies for explorations of the colonial archive.

‘women’s work as creative practice’ – 4 contemporary South African artist-women/artist-mothers

Chair: Candice Allison; Independent Curator; University of the Western Cape (PhD researcher) / Norwich University of the Arts (East Gallery Curator)

We propose an online session that unpacks the theme of ‘women’s work as creative practice’ through the creative practices of 4 contemporary South African artist-women/artist-mothers making contextually-inspired art: Zayaan Khan, Grace Cross, Dr Meghan Judge and Bev Butkow.

Videoed 20-minute creative interventions by each artist will be screened, followed by a round table discussion moderated by independent curator Candice Allison. These creative interventions are works of art themselves; they become experiential through exploring the texture, poetry, nuance and grit of each respective practice. In combination, they weave together a confident yet nuanced voice of South African artist-women proudly staking claim to their unique space in which their multiple perspectives and complex lives influence the richly multi-faceted art they make.

The four artists proposed for the ACASA panel were selected from a creative gathering held in September 2023 which served to provoke, question, and reframe how we exist in the world as individuals, in community, and in relation to all other living beings. It facilitated open disclosures around the exquisite joy and spirituality of investing deeply in a creative life, juxtaposed with many levels of complexity and vulnerability – balancing mothering and family responsibilities, financial strain, a general lack of support, stereotypically sexist attitudes and attacks, pressures on time and resources, mental health struggles etc. The gathering has become an important reference point – one devoid of shallow sentimentality – for considering the messiness of motherhood, life and creative experiences of South African artist-women/artist-mothers.

The four artists proposed for the panel are emergent artists holding post-graduate degrees; they create ‘thinking-art’ with substance derived from the depth of concept, intellect, application and time invested. They embrace a depth of life and artistic experience, and retain active control of their practices.

Zayaan Khan is a storyteller intrigued by the local urban and ecological environments and their interchangeable relationship. Through curiosity, research, experimentation and engagement, her work found a resting place in the nexus of land, seed and food as a means of understanding the world.

Artist/mother Grace Cross is a material painter who reflects the psychic and physical weight that women carry with them; raising awareness about motherhood, home, and feminist historiographies.

Artist and lecturer Dr Meghan Judge's PhD in the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South project at WiSER, Wits University, focuses on ocean-human relations and formulates an eco-social relational praxis for inquiry. Her work focusses on cross, trans and beyond-disciplinary engagements across creative and scientific communications that take up justice and temporal convergences of deep and urgent time.

Bev Butkow is a maker, carer, connector, collaborator whose make-shift constructions transgress boundaries between textile, painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation. Woven throughout her experimentation and exploratory playfulness is the presence of care – care for her tactile human-made materials, for an ailing planet, for the body, and for one another.

Moderator Candice Allison is an independent curator, academic and researcher, whose curatorial practice is concerned with contemporary art from Africa, the African diaspora, and the global South, that explores social-political issues.

The Promise and the Peril of Placing African artists in Global Narratives

Chair: Monica Blackmun Visona, Ph.D.; Professor of Art History and Visual Studies; University of Kentucky

Today Americans are encountering works by African artists in new contexts - on Instagram, in international art fairs in Miami, and in Los Angeles galleries. Artists based on the African continent may thus be discussed in narratives around the Diaspora, the Black Atlantic, MENA, indigeneity, the construction of gender and notions of race. Paintings by African women of the late 20th century appear in the newsletters of AWARE alongside those of feminists of their generation from other continents, and African sculpture of the colonial era stands beside European art of various periods in art museums from New York to Berlin. Given the nature of the internet, and the brief amount of time most visitors can spend in museums, these encounters are often unmediated by frameworks that might situate the African works in their cities, nations, or regions of origin. Some critics argue that African art and artists are therefore liberated from the bonds of heritage, no longer burdened by local histories or narrow community values, and may now share the economic and intellectual benefits of globalism. Art historians may seek to de-colonize their discussions of specific cultural contexts in Africa by adopting a political discourse that applies to the global south, or by engaging with social issues they believe to be universal. However, such narratives may overwrite the work of Africa's artists with ideas and values that may be quite different from their own. In some cases, a handful of African artists are assumed to represent the views entire continent in these exchanges. This panel invites papers that examine and critique exhibitions, publications, and other scholarly projects that have incorporated artworks by both Africans and non-Africans, and which have explored both the potential benefits and the limitations of international, intercontinental approaches. What have these projects gained by folding African art into global narratives, and what problems have they encountered?

No Comment! Explorations along the borderline of seeing, talking, and thought.

Chair: Till Förster, University of Basel

“Why do you want me to comment on my work? It's right here! Look!”

(Nzante Spee, painter, Bamenda, Cameroon, 2003)

Not all artists love to talk about their work. Some refuse to say anything, neither on themselves nor on their art. Banksy is a famous example, but elsewhere, artists may adopt similar attitudes as well. Besides the irritation that such refusals usually provoke among scholars who are expected to formulate their analyses in exhibition entries, articles, and books, the silence of artists points at two possible problems: first, a thorough tension between the artists and their work on the one side, and the expectations of scholars, critics, and the art world more generally at the other. Second, the epistemological problems of ekphrasis, namely the contradicting specificities of seeing and talking. The first problem often has many dimensions: a tension between the artist and the scholar or critic as individuals or as representatives of two different

institutional and life-worldly settings. The second problem may point at a general mistrust in all practices of ekphrasis because they may distort the intentions of the artist.

“The people who talk about it [i.e. a masquerade] are those who haven’t seen it.”

(Syoni Ouattara, elder of a poro lodge, Nafoun, Côte d’Ivoire, 2022)

Some artworks become discursive nodal points, attract comments and criticisms left and right. Others are seen by many and obviously have a public impact while their discursive presence is negligible. Still other artworks remain in a discursive limbo so that no coherent interpretation emerges. And finally, there are artworks that seem to silence the spectators while those who have not seen them continuously talk about them. Oftentimes, such diverging practices relate to the context in which artists and their audience live. For instance, in authoritarian regimes, artists are generally aware of the risks they run when they are recognised as authors of their work. By avoiding discursive articulations, they also avoid being tracked and persecuted for their art. Besides outright repression by those who hold power, hegemonic discursive formations may also silence artists and their works, for instance, when elders watch over an artwork that is not meant to be seen by a particular group of people.

This panel invites scholars of all disciplines and artists of all genres to reflect on their experience with the intangible borderline between seeing and talking. This panel seeks to learn more about silence as a practice and addresses the following general questions: When and why do artists prefer not to talk about their work? What expectations of ekphrasis do artists or scholars have to deal with? How do these expectations and their outcomes influence aesthetic appreciations of artworks? What happens when they are not satisfied? Why, when, and how become artists and artworks nodal points of public discourses? When and how are they exempted from public debates or eventually silenced?

Photography in the First-Person: The Interview as Source

Co-Chairs:

Antawan Byrd, Assistant Professor of Art History at Northwestern University and an Associate Curator of Photography and Media at the Art Institute of Chicago

Phil Taylor, Associate Curator, Department of Photography, George Eastman Museum

Leslie Wilson, Associate Director for Academic Engagement and Research, Art Institute of Chicago

How has and does the interview as a primary source shape our understanding of African photography? How do historians of photography in Africa solicit and make legible testimony about the objects they study? When and why do photographers speak about their work, and how do they constitute their listeners?

Between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, anthropologists, art historians, and curators (all primarily based in the West) acted on their growing interests in African studio photography by conducting and mobilizing interviews to frame the work of photographers across academic articles, popular publications, and through exhibitions. In many cases, the conditions governing such interviews remained opaque: the voice of photographers were sometimes misleadingly edited, paraphrased, or presented in summary form without the transparency of “Q & A” transcription. Sometimes transparency about language and translation was omitted. In other cases, misplaced records or inaccurate notations proved consequential to the attribution of photographers or resulted in distorted narratives, whether inadvertent or willful. Such instances, however, appear to pale in comparison to the body of rich, ethically-conducted, and carefully-presented knowledge generated from interviews as measured by their appearance in print scholarship and journalism, and in exhibitions through audio and film recordings or text transcribed from these formats. Several recent projects center the interview form transparently in their writing and reflexively discuss it as a methodology, reflecting greater sensitivity within the field of African photography toward how the voices of practitioners (and sometimes their photographic subjects), custodians, archivists, and other mediators register in scholarship and popular discourse.

To better account for voices that have been left out of the conversation about photography and to engage critically with the existing accounts, the field needs greater attention to the disciplinary structures, social dynamics, practical techniques, and platforms for dissemination that speak for photographs and the work of making them. This roundtable will examine the interview as source, method, performance, and practice. Discussants will consider the practical needs for conducting interviews, such as training, preparation, language proficiency, and formal and informal agreements. Other discussion topics will include issues of access, use, and a wide range of sensitivities that shape these dialogues. Through this conversation, we aim to begin the work of historicizing the role and evolution of the interview form within the field of African photography, recognizing that the foregoing dynamics continue to matter in art historical and museological

framings of photographic objects, as well as in the marketing of African photography and the careers of its practitioners.

Local museums and international collaborations: The “other side” of the story

Chair: Mathias Fubah Alubafi, Human Sciences Research Council

In recent years, discussions around the restitution of African artifacts from Western museums have dominated academic dialogues within art history and anthropology. This focus has resulted in the return of significant African art pieces to their source communities. Simultaneously, Western museums have embarked on extensive digitization projects for their African collections, aiming to broaden accessibility not only in the West but also in Africa and the originating communities. However, the funding for these endeavors predominantly originates from the West or Western museums that house these African collections. This financial reliance extends to collaborative initiatives between African-based museums and their Western counterparts, where the funding source often dictates the course of these partnerships.

While this financial support is ostensibly positive, it raises critical implications for both Western museums and their African or local counterparts, particularly concerning the preservation of diverse perspectives. Paradoxically, the funding intended to empower local museums and amplify their voices in managing their collections can inadvertently stifle these very voices. The influence of the funder often ends up directing the trajectory of collaborations, potentially silencing the voices the initiatives initially sought to elevate.

This call invites scholarly contributions that examine and elucidate the numerous efforts made by African-based and Western museums to foster diverse voices, whether through restitution efforts, digitization projects, or collaborative engagements. The focus will be on illuminating instances where these endeavors, aimed at empowering local voices, paradoxically lead to their suppression. Submissions can delve into collaborative ventures between local/palace museums and Western counterparts, as well as engagements between national museums in Africa and Western institutions, or any collaborative initiatives between African-based museums and Western counterparts.

Artist-Centered Approaches to African Restitution

Co-Chairs: Jennifer Bajorek, Professor of Comparative Literature and Visual Studies, Hampshire College
Abigail E. Celis, Assistant Professor in Decolonial Art History and Museum Studies, Université de Montréal

Our open roundtable invites contributions from scholars, artists, and activists critically exploring artist-centered approaches to the restitution, repatriation, and return of African art.

In recent years, artists have engaged in the arena of restitution in ways that are remarkably creative, generative, and varied. They have intervened in museum collections, made new objects, or responded to absent ones (Noral Al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, Laura Nsengiyumva, Kader Attia, Moridja Kitenge Banza). They have explored the aesthetic and material qualities of restitutable objects, or surfaced questions about the conditions and implications of return (Sammy Baloji, Saitabao Kaiyare and Elena Schilling). Some artists have developed novel approaches to localizing objects and visualizing their histories of movement across political and other borders (Kapwani Kiwanga, the Shift and Nest Collectives). Others have used speculative methods to explore the desires of source and descendant communities, which are not fixed in the moment of dispossession (Onyeka Igwe, Jihan El-Tahri). Still others have used performance-based strategies, enacting rituals or seizures in the heart of European and North American museum galleries, thus highlighting the manifold exclusions of individuals and communities from the institutions that hold their cultural heritage (Jelili Atiku, Mwazulu Diyabanza). Others, who have situated their work in Africa, in Indigenous communities, or in institutions elsewhere in the Global South, have used performance and adjacent strategies to activate relationships between communities and objects, to invite dialogue between communities and institutions, or to strengthen ties within and among communities (Memory Biwa, George Mahashe, Mamadou Khouma Gueye).

We convene this roundtable on two premises resonant with the triennial’s core thematic focus on human-, community-, and artist-centered practice. Firstly, that artist-centered approaches to restitution constitute a significant new area of contemporary artistic practice worthy of serious historical and theoretical analysis. The material, aesthetic, and relational inquiry at the heart of artist-centered approaches offers ways to diversify epistemologies and pluralize knowledge production. Secondly, that artists’ interventions in the

arena of restitution are garnering increasing interest in the context specifically of African restitutions. Their interventions may provide tools for radical listening and capacious, empathetic thinking, as well as models (or missed opportunities) for shifting restitutions discourse and practice toward the cultivation of sustainable and ethical institutional, community, and interpersonal relationships instead of museal paradigms focused on material permanence, dis/possession and accumulation.

Our theme offers myriad other connections with, and rich cross-pollination across, the triennial's core framework, including approaches to wellness, reparations, healings; mentorships, exchanges, collaborations; tangible and intangible knowledges and scholarly approaches; transparency in museum practices; decoloniality and decolonial approaches to the arts of Africa. By arts of Africa, we name a complex and plural range of objects, practices, and archives of material and expressive cultures that take material, immaterial, natural, cultural and/or spiritual forms. We welcome contributions presenting or critically exploring artist-centered projects physically situated in Africa as well as those led by artists working in contexts created or invited by European and North American holding institutions. Contributions may take any format.

Reimagining Public Art: Community Engagement, Sustainability, and Urban Transformation

Chair: Ajayi, Olayemi T.; Department of Art and Design, The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria ; Member, Editorial and Advisory Boards for the International Journal of Arts and Humanities, London, United Kingdom

This panel seeks to explore the evolving landscape of public art, focusing on innovative approaches that emphasize community engagement, sustainability, and the transformative potential of art in urban spaces. Public art plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity and vibrancy of cities. This panel aims to reflect on practices that actively involve communities in the creation, interpretation, and preservation of public artworks. How can public art be a catalyst for community dialogue and empowerment? How can it address environmental sustainability and contribute to the resilience of urban spaces?

Here is an invitation for discussions on participatory public art projects that actively involve residents in the co-creation of artworks, fostering a sense of ownership and connection to the public realm. Case studies and analyses will showcase successful models of community engagement, emphasizing the importance of diverse voices in shaping public spaces.

Sustainability is a key theme, and our panel will explore how public art can contribute to environmental awareness and sustainable urban development. From eco-friendly materials to installations that address climate change, we aim to examine the intersection of art, sustainability, and ecological consciousness in the public sphere.

The transformative potential of public art in urban spaces will also be a central focus. We intend to discuss how public art can redefine and repurpose underutilized urban areas, contributing to social cohesion and economic revitalization. The role of public art in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity will be examined, with an emphasis on projects that break down barriers and amplify underrepresented voices.

Additionally, the panel will be probing the role of city officials and policymakers in supporting and integrating public art into urban planning. How can collaborations between artists, communities, and city governments lead to more inclusive and sustainable urban spaces?

Through a combination of presentations and interactive discussions, our panel seeks to inspire a reimagining of public art as a dynamic force for community engagement, sustainability, and urban transformation. By exploring innovative practices and sharing insights from diverse perspectives, we invite credible studies to contribute to a holistic understanding of the potential of public art to shape the future of our cities.

Digitalization, Youth Economy, and the Future of Popular Arts in Africa

Co-Chairs: Rowland Chukwuemeka Amaefula; Department of Theatre Arts, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike
Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz.

Digitalization has created enormous entrepreneurial opportunities in Africa. Since the proliferation of digital networks at the turn of the millennium, an increasing population of internet users has employed these mediatized spaces to demonstrate their talents and express themselves. Rising unemployment rates have propelled the growing number of content creators who attain fame and affluence by framing lived experiences and commodifying them on social media platforms. These transformations are hinged on the spread of the internet and the consequent digitalization of popular arts. Despite the successes recorded so far in creating and circulating mediatized cultural products, these new mediums are plagued with uncertainties and vulnerabilities, resulting from government bans or partial restrictions of social media platforms such as Twitter in Nigeria and outright disruptions to internet access in other places in Africa. Authorities of many countries in the continent such as Mali, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Chad, Guinea, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, among others, have, between 2017 and 2021, applied URL-based blocking or throttling to limit internet access. Although users adopt Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to evade the bans, tensions arising from these disruptions widen existing populations without internet access and foreground the precariousness of digital popular arts on the continent. Incidentally, this trend has received little or no academic inquiry, since Africa has only begun recognizing Web 2.0 platforms as research sites. This panel examines the future of popular arts in these checkered spaces creating a new youth economy.

Raising Voices: Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Chair: Lynne Larsen, Assistant Professor, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

From Diébédo Francis Kéré's sustainable architecture in Burkina Faso, to Maurice Mbikayi's wearable garments made of computer keyboards in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Berni Searle's use of burning tires and coal dust in her photography and video pieces in South Africa, contemporary African artists have engaged with issues surrounding global warming and environmental instability in provocative ways. According to the World Meteorological Organization's 2022 report, Africa emits less than 10 percent of the world's greenhouse gasses, but is less able to cope with the devastation which result from global emissions than other continents. This panel seeks to explore how African artists, architects, film makers, and designers have expressed frustration with, exposed the consequences of, raised awareness about, and/or proposed solutions to environmental and climate crises through their work. Potential paper topics may consider (but are not limited to) art, architecture, fashion design, and/or film that deal(s) with:

- Environmental Justice
- Climate activism
- The displacement of people due to environmental disaster
- The exploitation of the land and people for resources
- The consumptive practices of the Global North
- The environmental impact of colonial legacies
- Water insecurity
- Air pollution
- Wildlife protection and/or biodiversity loss
- Deforestation
- Drought, flooding, tropical storms, and other natural disasters resulting from global warming
- Agricultural decline and soil degradation
- Solutions to environmental catastrophes

This panel considers the relationship between climate injustice and Africa's colonial history. Papers may consider how global warming and other environmental devastation constitute a contemporary colonization for Africa, and how the lives lost in environmental disasters reflect Achille Mbembe's discussion of necropolitics. Authors may also consider how art, architecture, fashion, or film have made apparent the interconnection of racial inequality and climate change.

Fight of the Century: The Rumble in the Jungle 50 years on

Co-Chairs: Elaine Sullivan, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Johannesburg
Ruth Sacks, Lecturer, University of Johannesburg

In October 1974 President Mobutu Sese Seko welcomed the world to Kinshasa, capital of his recently-renamed Zaïre. In a specially-1968 constructed stadium, the Stade du 20 Mai, famed American boxers

Muhammad Ali and George Foreman met to decide the world heavyweight championship. The fight was a media savvy culture coup for Zaïre's new regime and an important Africanized cultural event. It aimed to celebrate Congolese cultural prowess through various spectacles. One month prior to the match, the same stadium was the scene of Zaire 74, a three-day music festival featuring celebrated African-American and African musicians. To mark the 50th anniversary of this transnational collaboration, we propose a panel dedicated to analyzing this event as a Pan-African cultural touchstone from a plurality of perspectives.

The event and its protagonists formed a larger-than-life Cold War drama. By 1974, Ali was a prominent member of the National of Islam and had taken a public stand against racism and the Vietnam War. The as-yet unbeaten Foreman was largely seen by the Congolese press as an apologist for America. Applying rope-a-dope tactics, Ali came off the ropes to knockout Foreman in the 8th round. Ali, considered the underdog, was embraced by Mobutu as an embodiment of a warrior in the mold of the "authentic" African traditions he was then promoting as part of the new Zaïrian nation. Mobutu would be a winner regardless of the outcome in the ring, as the fight was broadcast to millions around the globe, showcasing the host's magnanimity. Mobutu embodied the geopolitical complexity of this Cold War spectacle; while he publicly espoused an independent pro-African stance, he accepted American political and financial support (indeed, the match was produced by Don King).

On the eve of the fight's 50th anniversary, this panel explores the "Rumble in the Jungle" as iconic knowledge production regarding Africa. We invite papers on a broad variety of topics across disciplines related to these events, including but not limited to:

- Zaire 74 and the Rumble in the Jungle within the context of other Pan-African festivals of the period (e.g. FESMAN '66, FESTAC '77)
- Boxing and the image of the boxer in Congo, past and present
- Mobutu's patronage of the arts (and authenticity)
- Legacies of the fight in American and Congolese cultural memory
- Creative responses from across the arts, such as film, popular painting, and music
- Rope-a-dope as tactic

In addition to traditional academic papers, artistic and creative practice research responses by visual artists are welcome.

Art-Making as Rituals and Rites: Exploring the Transformative Power of Creative Expression

Chair: May Okafor; Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Art-making and rituals/rites of passage are deeply embedded in human society and have played significant roles in personal, social, and cultural contexts throughout history. This panel aims to explore the inherent connection between art-making and rituals and rites of passage, highlighting how creative expressions can serve as transformative experiences that facilitate personal growth, foster human connections, promote healing, and mark important life transitions. In this context, art is therefore considered a performative process, with or without an end product that may serve as a relic. The panel is interested in the generative possibilities that artist-centered approaches to art-making bring to cultural, experimental, collaborative, or individualistic contexts, examining such questions as: How did distinct cultures navigate important life transitions using art as an agency? In what ways can the artist function as a shaman or the shaman as an artist? What possible connections exist between art therapy and ritualization through art-making? What roles do art-making and creative expressions play in ritual experimentation? What art-making processes possibly parallel distinct rituals or rites, and how have such processes been explored creatively? How have distinct artists negotiated their personal spaces while exploring their art processes as rituals or rites? To answer these questions, here are the scope and possible sub-themes to be addressed in this panel:

The Creative Process as a Spiritual Journey
Art Therapy: Healing and Psychological Transformation
Artistic Rituals for Self-Reflection and Contemplation
Art, Creativity, and Ritual Experimentation
Art-Making as Rites of Passage: Navigating Life Transitions
Adolescence and Coming-of-Age Artistic Rituals
Weddings and the Artistic Celebration of Marriage
Mourning and Art-making as a Ritual of Grief
The Transformative Power of Art-Making

Identity Formation and Collective Memory
Artistic Rituals and Empowering Marginalized Voices
Indigenous Art and Cultural Rituals: Connecting Past and Present
Artistic Rituals as Cultural Expressions
Art-making Rituals and the Unconscious Mind

By analyzing various historical, cultural, and contemporary examples, we will delve into the ways that art-making functions as powerful tools for self-discovery, expression, personal growth, identity formation, cultural development, and community building. The panel, therefore, hopes to offer a comprehensive analysis of the connections between art-making and rituals and rites of passage, emphasizing their transformative power in personal, social, and cultural contexts.

Spiritual Repair: Post-Secular Black Atlantic Arts

Chair: Dr Ferdinand de Jong; International Fellow, New Europe College, Bucharest, Romania

In the history of European social science, the prevailing idea was that modernization will result in disenchantment, to use Max Weber's words, and lead to secularization. However, since the late twentieth century, this idea of a unilinear secularization has been criticised and rejected. As secularism does not prevail in even the most secular societies of Europe, and traditional forms of religion have given way to new spiritualities, we now speak of a post-secular present. What are the implications of this re-conceptualisation of modernity for the study of Black arts?

The arts of Africa have always been deeply entangled with spirituality. In the religions developed in the "New World", such spirituality recurred in popular religions such as Vodun and Candomblé, and in the gospel music in African American churches. In the academic study of African and African American arts such spirituality has been recognized from the start: *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* by Robert Farris Thompson (1984) speaks of spiritual aspects of African and African-American arts -- and even of spiritual renaissance.

When we look at the history of European Modernism, it becomes clear that spirituality has played a significant role in the work by early abstract painters such as Kandinsky, Mondriaan or Af Klint. In the art history of Modernism, however, the role of spirituality has long been denied. Only with the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (1986), was the history of the spiritual in modernism properly recognized. This suggests that the spiritual has been subject to secular regimes throughout much of the twentieth century.

This panel explores how the spiritual has been transmitted in popular and modern Black art in a context defined by secularism. How have secularisms affected the production of spiritual arts in Africa, Europe, and the Americas? To what extent has spirituality been mobilized in producing transatlantic connections in the arts? Positing that coloniality was founded on secularism, to what extent can we understand the embrace of the spiritual in Black visual and material arts as a form of epistemic decolonization? Recognizing the important work of the Indian art historian Partha Mitter, to what extent should spirituality be understood as an orientation developed and circulated in the context of empire and how does the acknowledgement of global spirituality enable us de-centre European narratives of art? Situating spirituality in a post-secular Black Atlantic, this panel invites papers that address the spiritual in African and Black arts. Preferably, papers are to address how these arts have sought to decolonize secularism.

Past/Predecessors: Modern and Contemporary African Art Between Generations

Co-Chairs: Perrin Lathrop, PhD, Assistant Curator of African Art, Princeton University Art Museum
Gabriella Nugent, PhD, Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, University of East Anglia

The past has always been relevant to the study of African art, but recent interventions and events have both emphasized its significance and opened it up to question. In 2020, David Joselit proposed a framework for global contemporary art based on artists from the Global South staging their cultural heritage in the global contemporary art world. This assumption of a seamless relationship between artists and their heritage was rebuffed by Elizabeth Harney (2022) who compared it to the inaccurate alignments of "tribe" with "style" in early scholarship on African arts famously criticized by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1984). Meanwhile, African artists have received increased attention in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter protest movement in 2020 and concomitant demands to decolonize art history and expand museum collections in

Europe and North America. But this moment of celebration is plagued by a kind of forgetfulness around previous efforts to center African artists.

This panel is interested in the intergenerational relationship between modern and contemporary African artists and their predecessors. We take the idea of predecessors to loosely mean those who came before them. They include other artists, teachers, and artistic and cultural traditions, controlled and often silenced in colonial contexts. We invite papers that consider modern and contemporary artists who recover and translate these traditions in their work, but also those who deliberately distance themselves from them. For example, Uche Okeke transformed the abstract designs of uli body and mural painting into compositions that simultaneously rely on and empty them of their meaning. More recently, Nandipha Mntambo has rejected interpretations of her work in the context of the artist's Swazi background.

Beyond these instances of recovery and rejection, we are interested in artists whose work confronts the occlusions of Western centers. Despite the promises of globalization, when African artists debut in Europe and North America, their previous efforts on the continent and original contexts of making are often erased. Many are absorbed into Western schools. We accordingly invite papers that consider artists who locate themselves in an African artistic trajectory. For example, Ibrahim Mahama's installations and institutions pay homage to the teachings of his professors at KNUST; Michael Armitage's paintings, exhibitions, and Nairobi-based contemporary art center honor an earlier generation of East African artists; and Kemang We Lehulere's installations incorporate the work of South African modernists Ernest Mancoba and Gladys Mgudlandlu.

Museums in Africa and their Search for relevance as Source and Agent of Social Wellness

Co-Chairs: Dr. David Mbuthia, Deputy Director, Heroes Square Museums Sites and Monuments at the National Heroes Council, Kenya

Rosalie Hans, Post-Doctoral Research Associate, Rising from the Depths

Museums the world over are faced with the challenge of achieving sustainability and relevance to the modern social-economic and environmental dynamics. Most museums in Africa trace their origins from the colonial period. They were conceived based on the western concept of cabinet-of-curiosity as well as experts' calibration of authenticity and antiquity. As such, their collections, exhibitions and programmes were geared towards satisfying the western exploration quest, while intentionally excluding or disregarding the cultures and histories of the Africans.

After more than six decades of independence, almost all museums in Africa have continued to struggle in cultivating local relevance. For most of these museums, the colonial legacy is still easily traceable in their exhibitions, which have not been adequately reviewed and adapted to tell the stories of the local communities, to sufficiently yield the social wellness that is much needed in the continent's current highly dynamic socio-economic context.

This panel will explore how museums in Africa, have continued to seek relevance to their local communities through their collections, exhibitions and programmes which include partnerships and restitution. The panel discussions will place at the center the human face imbued by the perception of the local communities as the makers, interpreters and users of their tangible and intangible forms of arts. The panel will explore the extent to which the displays, interpretations, disseminations, community engagements, engagement of the youth, restitution and indigenous perspectives have been employed to represent and offer solutions to local communities and the African continent.

Knowledge Creation and Co-Curation in Museums and Public Spaces: Contestations and Advances

Co-Chairs: Bongani Ndhlovu (Executive Director, Iziko Museums of South Africa) and Silvia Forni (Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director Fowler Museum @UCLA)

Engaged criticism of conventional knowledge creation and circulation has broadened the public space as a multimodal sphere of critical engagements. Increasingly, it has seen focus on the creation of spaces that recognize the plurality of knowledges, co-curation of exhibitions, contestation of spaces and recognition of expertise and skills sets that operated outside the conventional spheres of knowledge production. In this round table discussion, we explore how this intellectual move has allowed for "new" forms of expression and how these have found articulation in exhibitions, publications and public programmes of public

institutions and non-conventional institutions. We also explore resistances and tensions in these spaces, and the new set of tensions and issues that may be generated by these new approaches.

Around the Object: New Directions in Museum and Curatorial Education in Africa

Co-Chairs: Ciraj Rassool, Professor, Department of Historical Studies, University of the Western Cape
Rory Bester, Professor, Department of Historical Studies, University of the Western Cape

More than reiterating existing senses of the ‘curatorial turn’, new and emerging curatorial programmes at universities on the African continent are questioning the nature of the ‘curatorial’ itself, not only as a radically expanded practice, but also in reimagining the role of the curatorial within both museum practices and constituted fields such as museum studies. In thinking through the ability of the curatorial to differently hold complex human-, community- and artist-centred practices, new curatorial pluralities are challenging the traditional specialisations and discursive orientations of the ‘museum’ and its objects, and instead opening other possibilities for thinking around the object, in forms that are embodied, sensory, spatial, kinetic and choreographic. In calling attention to the languages and practices around the object, the curatorial is confronted with complex questions about listening, histories, strangeness, inclusion, research, translation, argument and activism. It is being made to reach beyond the limits of ‘field’, outside of distinctions between tangible and intangible, and into the discomfort of positionality, personhood and intersectionality. In sitting with these questions, this panel is concerned with the methodological questions that underpin new ideas of the curatorial in teaching programmes offered on the African continent. As forms of pedagogy, ignorance, sharing, teaching, collaboration, learning and generosity, how do we experiment with and trouble the curatorial’s knowledge making in the museum’s present?

(De)Constructing Authenticity: New Methods and Case Studies

Co-Chairs: Sarah Van Beurden, Associate Professor, Ohio State University
Carlee S. Forbes, Curatorial Fellow, Fowler Museum at UCLA

The matter of authenticity, its construction and application, has for decades been the source of critical attention in the field of African Art Studies (and beyond). Among the many voices on the topic, Sidney Kasfir explained in 1992 that ideas of authenticity are based on flawed assumptions about “traditional society” and its artists as “bound by tradition.” Christopher Steiner’s scholarship has demonstrated how ideas about authenticity also influenced practices of making among carvers and traders in the Ivory Coast. (Steiner, 1994) Despite these critiques, authenticity continues to be a powerful category of analysis and classification, particularly in the setting of collections, museums, and art markets.

For this panel, we are interested in papers that build upon, challenge, and enrich this earlier literature. In keeping with the focus of the conference on “human-centered approaches to African Arts,” we are particularly interested in the ways in which individuals and communities both on and off the African continent blur, play into, disregard, or work outside of the analytical and theoretical lines of these categories.

In designing this panel, we have intentionally left the call open-ended. The topic of authenticity has and remains at the front of many art historical discourses. As we gather proposals, we hope to find new lines connecting each other’s methods and examples that will help to further probe this enormous discussion.

Angles we are interested in for this panel:

- Papers that pry apart the historical constructions of authenticity/ies
- Papers on object genres that undermine categories (with a specific interest in colonial craft making)
- Papers that consider examples of artists/dealers/collectors working intentionally against notions of authenticity
- Examples of artists who create works for sale that seek to conform or meet collectors’/audience’s expectations for “authentic” art
- Papers that show how objects have moved between categories as authentic and inauthentic, and the implications of these definitions
- Papers that evaluate the current impact of colonially-constructed understanding of authenticity
- Modern and contemporary arts struggling with or pushing back against these categories

From Belief to Heritage: Rethinking the museum.

Co-Chairs: Dr William Rea; Senior Lecturer in African Art, School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds
Iheanyi Onwuegbucha, PhD Candidate, Department of Art and Archeology, Princeton University

John Peel's (2017) documentation of iconoclasm in Yoruba culture and his assertion that the formulation of that culture is freighted by external and diasporic concerns stands at odds with a current explosion of interest from within Nigeria in local cultural forms. The development of heritage as a mode of cultural expression is now found across Africa and in a variety of different ways. The establishment of a number of new museums – often challenging the ‘Cartesian’ principles of a European museology – that place a sense of culture at their core, to shifts within local performative demonstrations of cultural heritage suggest that, at least in West Africa, there has been a demonstrable change in the way in which local ideas of tradition are being mobilised within the contemporary state. Peel’s work points to the twentieth century denigration of local cultural forms, whether as a systematic ideology of the colonial state (and its attendant evolutionist notions of primitivism) or on the part of world religious iconoclastic movements that have until very recently regarded cultural formations as either backwards or even framed them as satanic (thereby placing them within an (often Christian) logic of thought).

Does the concept of heritage then replace a notion of belief? Are practices and traditions from (a recent) past contained and constrained by the concept, domesticated as a part of an identity but losing purchase on the everyday? Or, is the implication a renewed interest in local cultural forms that might offer a different epistemic logic? Clearly there are implications that surround the ways in which the form of heritage is constructed and represented. Here the panel aims to stimulate a dialogue between museum display and design and the representation(s) of heritage as made and documented in local contexts. At question is the prevalence of the ethnographic and what is needed to avoid the reassertion of anthropological spectatorship. What might be learnt from community practice?

This panel asks for contributions that document the ways in which the shift into heritage is taking place – whether that is at the level of large, sponsored, museum projects or at local levels wherein cultural forms such as masquerade are now engaged as markers of identity. The work asks for a consideration of the ways in which heritage is increasingly at the heart of community making and what that concept actually means for local communities. That in turn offers questions about the challenges that exist in developing the concept and how it is mobilised at both local and state levels. Does the promotion of a particular material culture (in a museum for instance) suggest a return to an outdated notion of ‘tribal’ affiliation or is there something more subtle in the modern States’ accommodation of heritage. It looks to ask questions about the development of historical consciousness in relation to past practice and the way in which that consciousness is mobilised to counteract the European trope of the ‘traditional’.

Women & Non-Binary South African Artists: Revisioning Histories

Co-Chairs: Christopher Richards, Associate Professor, Brooklyn College (co-convenor)
Elizabeth Perrill, Professor, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Many of the celebrated forms of South African visual culture, from beadwork and ceramics to contemporary photography and performance art, are the result of women and non-binary artists. Despite this rich history, these artists and related histories of making are often relegated to the margins of South African art history. This panel seeks to engage with artists, researchers and curators who are actively prioritizing the creative expressions of women and non-binary artists, with a particular interest in how identity constructions have shaped artistic practice. Associate Professor Christopher Richards will reassess the ceramic sculptures of Bonnie Ntshalintshali, demonstrating that she was able to assert her own, distinct voice through her sculptures, one that thoughtfully addressed issues of black identity and spirituality during a particularly tumultuous period of South Africa’s history. Professor Elizabeth Perrill will foregrounding the legacy of women’s art forms in pedagogical practice historically in KwaZulu-Natal and the urgency of bringing women into classrooms and arts training as Indigenous Knowledge Experts.

Gender and Artistic Production from the Maghrib

Chair: Kimberly Cleveland; Associate Professor of Art History, Georgia State University

Due to the abundance of publications and exhibitions that focus on sub-Saharan art, production from North Africa, including that from the Maghrib (western and northern Africa with the exceptions of Egypt and

Sudan), has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Further, Maghrib artistic expression is frequently included in studies and shows of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) or Arab-Islamic work due to ethnic, religious, geographic, and cultural factors. Though this is one way to contextualize the production, this panel features work on and from the Maghrib in the interests of diversifying knowledge of art from the African continent. It also shines light on the intersection of gender and art, as “formal” artistic training, internationally recognized producers, and the generation of artistic knowledge from this part of the continent continue to be male dominated. As such, panelists may address “traditionally” female artistic forms of expression, including modifications in audience, material, and technique over time. Papers that investigate developments in what have historically been considered “male” art forms and what depictions of female subjects by male producers reveal about gender would also be applicable. Panelists may focus on specific artists, including the way that producers call attention to gender-related social and cultural challenges in their work. Individuals might explore how concepts of gender and art are understood within Amazigh, Arab, and European communities in the Maghrib. Participants may highlight appropriate methodologies, best research practices, and/or epistemological factors relevant to investigations of gender and art from this area of the continent. Lastly, individuals might speak on gender-related topics in relation to academic and popular publications and exhibitions. The panel Gender and Artistic Production from the Maghrib can accommodate papers from a variety of different disciplines that offer original and/or revisionist examinations of production mainly from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. It is already partially constituted with two participants.

Critical Inquiry in Design, Media and Material Culture of Sub-Saharan Africa

Co-Chairs: Richard Acquaye; Dean, School of Graduate Studies, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi - Ghana
Rikki Wemega-Kwawu; El Anatsui Experimental Studios., Takoradi - Ghana

This panel seeks to develop a framework for critical enquiry on design and material culture to interrogate the trajectories of the same in West Africa. It is part of a broader research that encompasses critical, creative enquiry and knowledge exchange, emphasising West African design and material culture. It further seeks to critically assess and contextualise arguments and viewpoints on design and material culture in West Africa. The main underpinning of this study is that design and material culture are or can be considered as scholarship that brings art history into dialogue with interdisciplinary material culture studies. The material components of an object, that is, its medium and physicality are key to understanding its cultural significance. Material culture has stretched the boundaries of art history and emphasized new points of contact with other disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, consumer and mass culture studies. In some instances, the concept is referred to as the thing theory and materialist philosophy. There are other extensions such as material culture of art and design that encompass published studies that explore the relationship between art and material culture in all of its complexity. West Africa has a rich and great diversity regarding culture, language and ethnicity. These are reflected in the lifestyle, food clothing and textile preferences of the people. The region is home to many tribes. Some of the tribes make up a substantial part of the population of the countries they inhabit. Typically, even tribes that live in proximity to each other maintain their unmistakable social practices and dialects. The Ashanti, Yoruba, Senufo, Fon and Bamana tribes are some of the notable ones and this gives basis to the diversity in design and material culture within the region.

The discourse quest to establish forums and resources conducive to dialogues among stakeholders and interest groups. It is anticipated that these engagements will stimulate transformative modifications, rendering design and material culture more inclusive and engaging. This engagement advocates for a resounding call to embrace creative development as a means to re-evaluate the role of design and material culture not merely in pursuit of economic gains but also in effecting meaningful change in the lives of traditional cultural custodians within the region. Design and material culture are an integral part of West Africa and are in a constant flux of transformation.

New Dimensions of Contemporary Art Studies and Practice in Nigeria and Ghana Since 2020

Co-Chairs: Deborah Dike, Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies.
Elijah Sofo, Takoradi Technical University (Ghana).

We seem to be inhabiting a constantly changing and evolving world since 2020, which has led to different critical (research) reflections on its implications on cultural, social, political, economic and other societal contexts across the globe. We find a possibility of this within the contemporary art space in Nigeria and

Ghana, and through our proposed round table, we seek to answer the question of how. We ask, “to what extent are post 2020 societal changes affecting Art practice and Art research in Nigeria and Ghana?” We seek answers to how art practitioners, critics and academics react with their works to post 2020 cultural, social, political, economic and other societal developments. We propose to bring together five to six scholars and practitioners of both material and immaterial art- ranging from sculpting/sculptors to Internet memes/graphic designers. We believe that this roundtable discussion will bring new, varying and balanced perspectives that will enrich contemporary art study and practice in and of Africa.

Photographic Transversals: Mobility, Intermediality, and Temporality in African Photography

Co-Chairs: Michelle Fikrig, PhD Student, Graduate Center, City University of New York
Kinaya Hassane, PhD Student, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Stemming from conversations started in a seminar at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, this panel will bring together four papers exploring 20th and 21st century photography from across the African continent. Each paper explores the complexity of the photographic medium and its wide-reaching connections across time and space. These connections are oftentimes catalyzed by the medium’s shape-shifting abilities, transforming into a vast array of physical objects: from contemporary fine art photographs, to glossy ad-filled magazines, to candid snapshots.

Taking the conference’s human-centric theme as a jumping off point, this panel will trouble the relationship between humans and photographs. As such, each paper investigates photography as part of a wider network constituted by the complex interplay between humans, photographic objects, and the (urban) environment. These explorations move away from predominant discussions in Africanist art history about the agency of photographic subjects, a concern that emerges from legacies of anthropological and anthropometric photography on the continent. Rather than focusing on the sitters’ agency, or that of the consumer or audience, this panel seeks to question how photographic objects themselves move through space and exist across time to constitute new realities and enact new possibilities.

Kinaya Hassane’s paper will focus on the work of contemporary Malagasy photographer, Malala Andrialavidrazana, and the ways that her series, Echoes, radically reimagines notions of Afro-Asian solidarity that were born out of the 1955 Bandung Conference. Michelle Fikrig’s paper investigates Drum magazine’s Nigerian edition as a crucial node in a networked ecosystem of African and Diasporic press, one that often counters the perceived homogeneity of the projected African experience of the post-independence era. Juul Van Haver’s paper examines photography from colonial Kinshasa and its intersections with urban nightlife and intermedial afterlives as album covers.

The panel’s discussant, Prita Meier, is an Associate Professor of Art History at NYU. Her forthcoming book, *The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast*, broaches the themes of photographic circulation and objecthood that cut across all four papers, making her a particularly fitting interlocutor for the panelists and audience.

RE-ENGAGING THE GEARS OF CONSERVATION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE IN MODERN BENIN

Co-Chairs: David Oshorenoya Esizimotor, Director, The Basic School International, Benin City, Nigeria
Esther Esosa Esizimotor, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

In the ever-evolving landscape of the modern world, the rich cultural heritage of Benin faces the challenge of preservation and transmission to future generations. As custodians of this vibrant heritage, it is imperative to re-engage the gears of conservation and discuss strategies to ensure the seamless transmission of Benin culture be it storytelling, music, language, dance, bronze-casting or architecture. This round table aims to bring together scholars, cultural enthusiasts, community leaders, artist, educators, and policymakers to evaluate current conservation practices and to seek ways to rejuvenate and sustain the cultural legacies of Benin City.

We are proposing a panel of people with different methodological approaches in series of structured discussions of aspects of Benin cultural heritage. Each panelist will talk about what they did in their study(s) – what method/methodology they chose and why, and what they learned from what they did, while focusing on methodology as well as knowledge about the phenomenon studied.

Panelist 1: David Oshorenoya Esizimotor

Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Postcolonial Benin City: The Missing Links

Every year, thousands of traditional and historic buildings in Benin City are pulled down by private, corporate and public sector developers to make way for modern structures without clear consideration for the values of architectural heritage conservation. This has led to countless and needless cultural heritage losses for Benin and the global cultural heritage space. This study investigates the current state of the architectural heritage conservation practice in Benin City while also appraising her heritage conservation values at the level of the people, experts and government in order to determine their levels of compliance to the best heritage conservation practices around the world with view to developing a suitable and holistic blueprint for modern African cultural heritage conservation.

Panelist 2: Esther Esosa Esizimotor

Title: Retelling the 'Omoosewa' Folktale Through the Radical Voices of Children

The retelling of traditional folktales serves as an intangible and dynamic conduit for cultural preservation and evolution. This study explores an innovative approach of retelling the renowned 'Omoosewa' folktale through the radical voices of children in Benin City. By focusing on inclusive storytelling, the study involves children as listeners as well as active participants contributing their perspectives in reshaping the narrative and illustrating Omoosewa's travails with images from their dynamic minds. By incorporating the diverse viewpoints of children, the story takes a dynamic turn towards thought provoking conclusions and refreshing views of life and their culture.

THE CHALLENGES OF VISUAL ARTS ENTERPRISE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

Co-Chairs: BOJOR ENAMHE, Professor, University of Cross River
Umama Nnochiri, Professor, Cross Rivers University of Technology

Visual Arts constitutes a vital source of socio-economic development of any society as well as the progress of the artist. Art in Africa combines the craft of creativity with the search for values that regenerate society. There is no denying the fact that the visual arts are booming in many parts of the world (in Europe, the USA, and China for example), while some countries in West Africa are yet to experience such patronage. This roundtable will aim to develop innovative knowledge necessary to get artists started with their practice. As such, the following questions are posed for discussion: How can art enterprise be encouraged in West Africa? How can art audiences be developed and engineered for better patronage? Are linkages with foreign markets, individuals, organizations, and institutions central to art development? Contributions concerning research and/or training on how to successfully launch careers in the visual arts, auctions, art galleries, art fairs and biennials are welcome topics.

Queer Hybrids in Contemporary African Art

Co-Chairs: Abigail Celis, Assistant Professor, Art History and Museum Studies, University of Montreal
Ivy Mills, Continuing Lecturer, History of Art, University of California, Berkeley

This panel seeks to examine the role that hybrid human-plant-animal-machine-alien bodies play in contemporary visual arts of Africa and the African diaspora. Anthropomorphized figures have a long history in African oral and literary storytelling, as well as in performance and sculptural traditions. Related figures appear in contemporary art; for example, hyena-men, chicken-men, and monkey-men abound in recent Senegalese works, featuring in sculptures by Soly Cisse and Mamady Seydi; a film by Selly Raby Kane; paintings by Fode Sidibe; and mixed media works by Omar Ba. These works are informed by Wolof oral tales that use anthropomorphized animal characters to reinforce dominant norms and values while simultaneously delighting in their mischievous, boundary-crossing, and rule-breaking behavior, entertaining a disruptive queer animality that threatens to subvert established order in the human community before it is contained. Other contemporary artists have taken up African traditions in which a variety of objects and beings are understood to contain or extend personhood, sometimes mediating the transfer of personhood from one form to another or the merging of different persons into a single body. In Soñ Gweha's performance installations, for example, the safou fruit is one materialized form of a queer spirit energy that can inhabit different people and that is mobilized by the artist for healing, emancipation, and the exploration of "the interconnectivity between beings and elements."

Taking the hybrid body in other directions, artists such as Wangechi Mutu or Nandipha Mntambo use collage and digital photography to depict sexualized and monstrous female bodies in their exploration of race-sex-species relations, colonial erotics, and femininity. Maurice Mbikayi and Julie Djikey, dressing themselves in technological debris to become human-animal-machine composite bodies, interrogate the ecological, political and social legacies of extractive (neo)colonial structures. The aesthetic and epistemological sources and concerns that drive artists' engagements with queer, hybrid bodies are plural and reflect the diverse local and global positionalities from which these artists create.

Keeping this plurality in mind, the papers in this panel ask when, where and why do queer, hybrid bodies appear in African and Afro-diasporic artistic representation? In what ways do contemporary imaginaries of mutating, shape-shifting or anthropomorphized bodies draw on previous figures of hybrid bodies? What do these bodies revisit, resuscitate and resist? What is their queer potential? In line with the ACASA 2024 theme, our panel addresses questions of personhood; wellness and healing; and the relation between intangible knowledge and artistic practice.

Making and Representing West African Textiles and Fashions

Co-Chairs: Dr. Ablavi Mandirann AMEGNONKA, Lecturer, Department of English Studies, University of Kara, Togo.

Dr. Adwoa Owusua BOBIE, Research Fellow at the Centre for Cultural and African Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana.

Dr. Malika KRAAMER, Associate Researcher, Global Textile Lab, University of Bonn/Honorary Curator, National Museum of Ghana (Ghana Museums and Monuments Board).

Textile and fashion production and usage are at the core of West African practices and discourses. The cultural, social, political, and economic implications of their production and usage, as well as their representations and appropriations, have played a significant role in global flows of textile and fashion items, often in a context of asymmetrical dependencies. Thus, reflecting the ongoing interactions between West Africa and other parts of the world.

Their histories are actively embodied and negotiated in contemporary debates. The re-engagement with and reinterpretation of this past follows multifaceted trajectories in West Africa, shaped by varied positionalities and memories of its knowledge-producers - makers, artists, designers, academics, and activists - and different epistemologies shaped by gender dynamics, inherited cultural and linguistic knowledge, and linguistic divides such as francophone versus anglophone.

Such processes have stimulated the pluralization of knowledge and expertise. However, this has also led, in some instances, to conflicting discourses that inadvertently foreground Western perspectives over local representations, underscoring the need for a more nuanced, inclusive, and decolonized understanding of West African textile and fashion histories.

In this panel, we invite speakers who focus on both past and present material knowledge production of West African clothing, textiles and fashions histories and the ways their plurality of perspectives and positionalities are negotiated. The panel is interested in decolonial approaches to questions of cultural significance, social, political, and economic values, aesthetics and creativity, production and consumption, positionality of producers and consumers and (mis)representation on local and global levels. It invites papers to critically discuss mutual sartorial influences between the peoples of different geographical areas of West Africa.

The panel's vision is to create conversations that interrogates the forms of expertise and knowledge produced on West African textiles, clothing, and fashion, deconstructing Eurocentric narratives and forging a more integral methodology and conceptualization of West African arts.

This is a collaborative panel that is opened to both Francophone and Anglophone and Francophone scholars and practitioners who work on textiles, clothing, and fashion in West Africa. On specific questions, panelists are expected to Examine issues that critique dominant Western epistemologies, as well as proffer a more inclusive and integrated approach to knowledge production. Other relevant questions are:

1. Address ways by which scholars and practitioners can work collaboratively across boundaries.

2. How to share knowledge produced by scholars and practitioners - weavers and designers to other practitioners and the general public.
3. How to give room to plural epistemologies that cut across West African borders to present a more holistic discourse on textiles and fashion in the region.

“Collaborating Across Continents: Developing a Contemporary Masquerade Exhibition for North American and African Audiences”

Co-Chairs: Lisa Homann, Associate Professor of Art History, UNC Charlotte
Jordan Fenton, Associate Professor of Art History, Miami University Ohio

This panel examines a major international traveling exhibition focused on the creations of living masquerade artists in order to make clear that masquerade is fundamentally contemporary. *New Masks Now: Artists Innovating Masquerade in Contemporary West Africa* tells the stories of four contemporary artists working with the medium of masquerade (Hervé Youmbi from Cameroon, Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa from Nigeria, David Sanou from Burkina Faso, and Sheku Fofanah from Sierra Leone). The exhibition will open at the New Orleans Museum of Art in April of 2025 and travel to various venues including, but not limited to, the Museum of Black Civilization in Dakar, Senegal and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. This panel addresses curatorial concerns with the development of a partnership that spans Western and African institutions.

In order to mitigate economic and logistical challenges, the team opted to create two iterations of the same exhibition concept: one in Africa and one in North America. This panel examines just some of the collaborations between North American and African researchers, artists, and institutions required to bring the exhibition to its varied audiences. The introduction pinpoints the premise of the exhibition and clarifies the rationale for developing two versions of the show. The next presentation considers the methodology of commissioning new masquerade ensembles from contemporary artists for American and African museum collections. A joint presentation investigates the collaborations between organizers to create an exhibition that is intelligible to the different core audiences of specific American and West African museums. The final presentation analyzes the vital role of a contemporary artist engaged in conceptualizing and directing creative research in two African countries while also consulting on the exhibition’s development.

Nigerian Contemporary Ceramic in Retrospective View

Co-Chairs: AFAM OKWUDILI; VISION IN CLAY (GROUP OF POTTERS AND CERAMICS ARTIST IN NIGERIA)

Chukwuebuka Okwuba, Creative Artist at Ejo Temple of Creativity

The meaning of pottery as a profession to a layperson is manual labor or craft. It is one of the oldest forms of craftsmanship and has been practiced in almost every part of the world, evolving through the ages. Nigeria is not exempt from this developmental trajectory.

While there are other ancient ceramic cultures, the earliest form of the pottery tradition in Nigeria can be traced back to Nok ceramics sculpture. Interestingly, they share similar characteristics and traditions, and this paper aims to discuss them.

Furthermore, this paper aims to explore the traditional methods employed in pottery making, emphasizing the indigenous ornaments that are unique to the history and tradition of the culture that produced them. Throughout the research, we will delve into the indigenous potters and their pottery traditions, which have transformed into what is now known as pottery centers in Nigeria. Additionally, we will examine how these centers have incorporated modern techniques into their pottery in recent times.

OBJECTS REFUSE TO BE CANCELLED (#babybathwater)

Chair: Kathy Curnow; Professor of African Art History, Cleveland State University

Reports of the African object’s death or abandonment are premature. Object-centered studies distinguish our discipline from allied fields that concentrate on people’s societies (anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and behavioral economics), events (history), or interactions (social psychology, performance studies). Beginning inquiries with an object focus is not exclusive.

Explorations of humanity, community, artists, and varied perspectives are always possible, and have been among the associated paths that objects direct us toward. When art history was in its nascence, it centered on artists' biographies (Vasari), stylistic cycles (Burkhardt), and the identification of hands (Berenson). Other directions sprouted, such as iconography and iconology, and the application of various literary and social theories. Because of its close relationship with human-centered anthropology, African art history has always favored the object in context. We bear the rarely-credited responsibility for increasing that emphasis in art history generally in the last thirty or so years, while also adopting broader disciplinary directions.

Since the 1970s, few Africanist art historians have considered the object solely as an end unto itself. Research on the continent replaced the formalism and stand-alone connoisseurship of the armchair Africanist. While these tools still have a place, objects more frequently serve as an invaluable entry point that draws in specialists and non-specialists. Objects have the power to generate greater interest than an image-free article or museum panel alone, whether physical, in print, or digital.

In a visually-dominant era when Object-Based-Learning (OBL) is infiltrating diverse academic fields from early STEAM education to Ph.D. programs, why abandon this proven method of engendering curiosity and absorption in humanity? Forsaking the object can lead us Africanist art historians into worthy arenas that may be more Eurocentric than not—museums' historical collecting policies or legal issues regarding restitution of looted works are compelling topics, even to the general public, but they have little to do with the original meaning and function of individual objects and provide greater insight into Western reception and attitudes than African ones.

Works from Africa's more distant, precolonial past usually lack information about their artists and, frequently, the beliefs, patrons, and symbolic systems that produced them. Whether the object indicates temporal or geographic relationships, validates concepts, demonstrates surprising breaks with known continental directions, signifies an individual artist's anomalies, or stimulates significant, unanswerable questions and speculation, it is evidence and a document unto itself, a vital aspect of art history. This panel's speakers will begin with a single, precolonial object, and explore it within a matrix of concepts, other objects, oral history, religion, community, and additional factors. Some objects are well-known but can yield new possibilities and information, others are more obscure. The panelists consider objects far more than mere illustrations, but see them as jumping-off points for exploring possibilities. Collaboration and broader involvement in investigations of this type are highly desirable, but the object is not a roadblock to such endeavors. New Internet ventures could provide a structure for advantageous cooperation and alliance by soliciting commentary on objects or topics without extensive gatekeeping.