

ART HISTORY & FETISHISM ABROAD

Global Shiftings
in Media and Methods

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Gabriele Genge
Angela Stercken (eds.)

**Art History and Fetishism Abroad.
Global Shiftings in Media and Methods**

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The Court in Dakar.

Political Aesthetics in the Post-Colony

“Mes œuvres ne sont rien, elles ne sont pas que des
voies de connaissance, elles ne sont pas faites pour
être vendues ou pour un quelconque marché.”¹

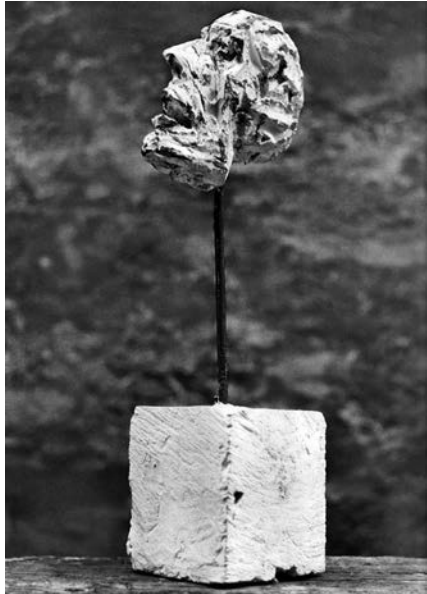
Line of Questioning: Political Aesthetics

The film “La cour/ Der Hof” from 2012, which focuses attention on the atelier of the Senegalese performance artist Issa Samb (Joe Ouakam) and his experimental art with the artist group “Laboratoire Agit-Art,”² raises a number of issues. These revolve around the history of the artist group “Laboratoire Agit-Art,” the œuvre of the artist Issa Samb, the artistic infrastructure in Dakar from independence in 1960 through to the Biennale of 2012, and finally the difficulties of filmmaking – the selection of the motifs, themes, and interview partners when shooting and on the editing table. The following considerations will however focus on an aspect that, while repeatedly hinted at in interviews, is never explicitly discussed and became all the more mysterious and important over the course of the work done on the editing table: the question as to the critical potential of the particular aesthetic of the court, which is at once a living archive and museum of the Senegalese avantgarde as well as a vital, rambling total work of art that integrates the creativity of chance and natural processes.

The historical relicts of “Laboratoire Agit-Art” in Issa Samba’s court are unlabeled. They form archaeological layers which – like the love and condolence letters of the artist’s friends – counteract any linear storytelling. The presentation treats

1| Issa Samb, qt.: *Revue Noire*, 7 (1992/93), 9. “My works are nothing, they are no traces of awareness, they are neither made for vendues nor for the art market” (trans. by ed.).

2| “Der Hof/ La Cour,” D 2012, 95 min. A film by Dieter Reifarth and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff.



11



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The sight of the dead Potosching, the gaping hole of his open mouth and the experience of human life petrified into a thing, undergoes an eerie mirroring in the sculpture, as a

thing brought to life. Admittedly, this is only one of the components. As Reinhard Hohl first noticed, in the sculpture *Head on a Rod* Giacometti drew on the over-modeled and painted skull from the Baining people in Papua New Guinea which the artist could see at Basel's ethnological museum (Ill. 12).¹ The severed skull in the Basel museum is a fetish, or at least it was for Giacometti, since the differentiated concept of fetish, to which in particular Hartmut Böhme's *Fetishismus und Kultur* from 2006 first contributed, could not hold any relevance for him. In contrast, Giacometti's notion of the fetish was probably covered by the simple definition given in *Larousse classique illustré*: "Fetish' (...). Material object that is venerated like an idol by blacks or savages."² And Giacometti would have seen the connection between the skull-object and fetishism as so closely entwined as André Albert from the *Congrégation du Sacré-Cœur* had when considering the cult of the skull practiced in a region of Cameroon: "The cult of the dead (the cult of the skull and the ancestors) seemingly constitutes completely the fetishism."³

1 Hohl, Reinhold: *Alberto Giacometti*, Stuttgart 1971, 295, Ill. 63 f. Cf. Rubin, William (ed.): *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, II, [1984], 4th ed. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988, 32.

2 "fétiche (...). Objet matériel vénéré comme une idole par les nègres ou les sauvages." Augé, Claude (ed.): *Larousse classique illustré, nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique*, 28th ed., Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1919, 397.

3 Albert (S. C. J.), *André: Au Cameroun français*, Paris: Éditions de l'Arbre, 1943, 34.



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But neither biographical influences – Giacometti's various encounters with death – nor the New Ireland "fetish" suffice alone to set the conditions of possibility for the *Head on a Rod* (see ill. 11). Overlaid by his confrontation with death and the exhibition piece in the ethnological museum, in Giacometti's *Head on a Rod* the association striking Mombert upon seeing his portrait by Hermann Haller, with which I opened my considerations, is – in a sense – materialized and concretized. Without wanting to imply historical inevitability, we may at least assume that this concretization was inherent to the image discourse as a potential. Not least in the art of Hermann Haller, the mounting, introduced to his oeuvre with the Mombert portrait and later taken up again in the portrait of Marie Laurencin or an anonymous "head," pressed towards concretization. While they do not venture as far into the morbid and a reliance on so-called "primitive art" as in the work of Alberto Giacometti, the mounting at least comes close to both: for instance in the *Mask of Japanese Woman* (around 1919)⁴ or the *Mask D.M.* (Ill. 13) from 1941, here with the motif of eyes either fully closed or on the verge of closing. In the case of the *Mask of a Japanese* this is also noticeable in the exotic model, while it is evident in both in the choice of the "primitive" genre of the mask. These are not the severed heads of Mongolian rebels, and Giacometti's alive-dead *Head on a Rod* is even far further removed: Haller's sleeping or contemplating masks are too handsomely aesthetic, and the closed eyes allude to the death motif at the most. But these masks by Haller already occupy a field of tension that was inherent to the

4 Mounting on or to a metal rod is not definitively ascertainable for the "Mask of a Japanese Woman."

Illustrations

- III. 1 The shiji ding vessel in the headquarters of the United Nations; photograph by the author in 2006
- III. 2 The simuwu ding vessel, in: Zhongguo meishu quanji bianji weiyuanhui (ed.): Zhongguo meishu quianji – Qingtongqi, Beijing, 1985
- III. 3 The shenghe ding vessel, Photograph by the author in 2007
- III. 4 The shenghe ding vessel in the Yuanming Yuan Memorial Park, Beijing; photograph by the author in 2007
- III. 5 Art works in the North Garden of the Headquarters of the United Nations, New York, left: The shiji ding vessel, right: Evgeny Vuchetich, Let Us Beat Swords to Ploughshares; photograph by the author in 2006

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