

# Art on the edge: political aspects of aestheticizing the primitive\*

**Vera L. Zolberg** De Amerikaanse hoogleraar dr. Vera L. Zolberg is voor het universitaire jaar 1992-1993 aangesteld als *visiting professor*. Zij bezet daarmee de bijzondere leerstoel kunstsociologie die vanwege de Boekmanstichting is ingesteld aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam. In dit essay beschrijft zij de esthetisering van de zogenaamde *outsiderkunst* in de afgelopen decennia, en de opname ervan in de canon van de ‘hoge’ kunst.

## Introduction

The coming to public attention of ‘new’ art forms should alert us to the multiple significances that this phenomenon encompasses. Especially when the forms have been otherwise classified – not arts but crafts; not aesthetic object but sacred; not *oeuvre* but fetish – the implied changes in genre boundaries and hierarchical arrangements encompass not only aesthetics but extra-aesthetic components. A striking recent case of this process is the social construction of ‘primitive’ art. Though created for one purpose, an object may be redefined, more than once, and by different agents. From artefact or fetish, it has come to be absorbed in the aesthetic nexus of inspiration to artists, cultural institutions, art collections. No longer an outsider to the socially constituted Western European art worlds, it is now treated as ‘artwork’.<sup>1</sup>

The Western category of ‘outsider art’

includes several types of cultural products and processes. Their redefinition corresponds to shifts in both aesthetic and social meanings; global political and economic trends, including the mass media; and professional and academic developments.<sup>2</sup> For primitive or ‘tribal’ art these processes are deeply embedded in the history of colonialism and imperialism. The construction of the category of primitive art starts with the cultural products made by peoples, largely non-Western, who assigned religious, functional, and/or aesthetic meanings to their works. As a reminder that the category of ‘outsider’ is intrinsically relational, that its connotations depend upon what it is compared to, we may consider the discoverers of the primitive as outsiders of a sort, in relation to existing societies. These agents of the West – explorers, conquerors, missionaries – in the lands that became their colonial possessions, considered the objects as

booty or treasure; curiosities; scientific documents; decorations, before they or others subsequently redefined them as art. This trajectory has been analyzed by a number of scholars representing the fields of art history (Goldwater, 1939-1986), anthropology (Clifford, 1988), criticism (Kramer, 1981), museum professions (Rubin, 1984; Vogel, 1988), as well as by creative artists and schools of art, each in their own way (Gauguin, Cubists such as Picasso and Braque, Fauves or Expressionists, including Matisse, Nolde, Barlach, and others).<sup>3</sup>

In recent years a number of scholars in diverse fields have begun to analyze this transformative process either as a specific case, or in the context of a more general intellectual project. My ongoing research on the construction of the aesthetic revolution of modernism incorporates the process of redefinition of primitivism by actors in major centers who came to constitute a transnational set of opinion leaders for rising status communities (Zolberg, 1983, and in process). Among others they included the English critics, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the American photographer and publicist, Alfred Stieglitz, the French anthropologist, Marcel Griaule, the surrealist writer, Michel Leiris, and museum founder, Paul Rivet. They participated in reorganizing the museum collections of colonialist states (Belgium, Germany, France, England) as well as of private collectors, including artists.

Despite its increasing richness, most of this scholarship has focused rather narrowly on how the works were appropriated by the agents of the West. It has tended to stop short before the intervention of the makers of the works, their direct descendants, or those claiming kinship with them.<sup>4</sup> In this essay I focus on this neglected area, with specific attention to the interplay of the construction of ethnic identity, aesthetic choices of contemporary artists, art

market forces, the policies of cultural institutions, and the seeking of political empowerment by previously excluded groups in the United States. Rather than attempt to encompass all possible groups who have achieved some visibility in recent years (Hispanic, Haitian, African American, Native American), I look primarily at the legitimation of African art, with some reference to others where appropriate. I explore the intersection of different forms of appropriation and the interplay of social status aspirations of elites (collectors, museum patrons and others), changing aesthetic criteria of quality, market factors, and demands by ‘outsider artists’ for inclusion in dominant art worlds.

## The artistic discovery of African art

In the preface to his important study of how the primitive came to enter the domain of modern art, Robert Goldwater observed that as long ago as the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889 Van Gogh and Gauguin were able to see ‘admired examples of the architecture and sculpture of “primitive” peoples.’ Yet, writing in the mid-twentieth century, he noted that art historians still largely ignored primitive art, and even anthropologists continued to emphasize its social functions rather than its aesthetic qualities.<sup>5</sup> As an art historian Goldwater was interested in tracing the changing meanings and evaluations of the primitive, and their influence on modern artists. But, he argued, modern artists are not ‘primitive’ artists; rather ‘they must necessarily be *primitivistic*’ because they are not the real thing, but inspired by it. This observation contains a certain ambiguity because it represents on the one hand a positive assessment of non-Western art, but on the other implies that only a narrow range of that art is admirable, presumably the works that can be associated with some aspect of Western aesthetics.

The nineteenth century was a time of 'preparation' in that artists took the inspiration from what they had access to that suited ideas current during their time. From the mid-century onward, this consisted of an archaicizing interest in the exotic (Orientalism), early Christian and classical naïve, marginal provinces (e.g., Brittany). In part this interest contained an element of nostalgia reinterpreted in a romantic, emotional, intellectual seeking after a mythical simplicity, harmony, and incorporated their decorative elements in certain styles. This was the case with Japonisme, Cloisonisme, *Art Nouveau* and other styles. Later, after the turn of the century, the primitive was taken as a source of what Goldwater refers to as the 'ferocious' rather than the nostalgic, and served as a key to unlock both the seemingly hypercivilized intellect and the subconscious, which had been repressed by it.

From the standpoint of the anthropological critic, James Clifford, the process of change in conceptions of primitive art is complex, systematic, and historically transient. He believes that in the long run it will come to be viewed as a 'local story' in that it is part of the hegemony and appropriation by the West of its conquered peoples, a hegemony that is destined to change.<sup>6</sup> Clifford explains how the transformation of exotic objects has been contextualized and valorized in the West. He explores the dimensions of 'authenticity' and its opposite, 'inauthenticity' on the one hand, masterpiece and artefact on the other. Combining them results in an enclosed 'semiotic square' in which zones of dominance serve to situate the changing conception of objects or processes.<sup>7</sup> Works are considered more valuable if they are assigned to the zone of authentic masterpieces as opposed to the zone of authentic artefacts; or if they move from

technological to aesthetic definition, generally by passing through what Clifford takes to be the intermediate zone of classification as a 'curio'.<sup>8</sup>

The dominance of curiosity cabinets, widespread by the eighteenth century, and the growing interest in incorporating scientific ordering of specimens brought from all parts of the world, were succeeded after Darwin's publications by the treatment of collections as part of evolutionary natural history in many European and American museums. As Alma Wittlin points out, 'according to the adherents of Museological Darwinism even specimens of archaeology or crafts were to be arranged as a consultative library of objects progressively subdivided into orders and genera'. (Wittlin, 1970, pp. 134-135). This association of cultural products with biology, and the underlying assumption that tribal works were primitive predecessors to the arts of high civilization served to assign them to an inferior position, indeed, to assign a *non-human status* to the makers of the work. Instead of considering the works as individual creations by individual artists, they were considered the anonymous output of folk artists or craftsmen.

Compared to the 'noble' view of the romantic 'genius' dominant by that time in Western art, this 'collectivization' has demeaning connotations. There is, however, an alternative romantic view, in which anonymity is associated with the archaicizing holism of life based upon cooperation rather than individualism.<sup>9</sup> Sociologically, this parallels the nineteenth century ideas of Toennies and others, who considered the *Gemeinschaft*, represented by small communities of peasants, to be closer to the 'true' nature of man. An opposing interpretation implied in the definition of the primitive as qualitatively distinct from the civilized, with its specialized domains, is convincingly interpreted in a negative light by Sanford Gilman. Taking it as

embedded in the project of creating 'the other' he shows that primitivism was used to justify European dominance over the colonized (Gilman, 1985). Yet from the standpoint of certain artists and intellectuals, the same otherness represented the positive connotation of culture at its most authentic, closer to primitive, elemental, human nature than the artificiality of civilization (Goldwater, 1986, p. 120). Regardless of how evaluated, whether positively or negatively, the cultural products were, at least, increasingly likely to be preserved in various types of collections.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, virtually all collections of tribal arts (at first largely from Oceania) were kept in ethnographic collections. Only at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century did certain of such objects come to be redefined as art. Supported by the vision of contemporary European artists, themselves enabled to see exotic works by visiting world's fairs and ethnographic museums, the market for these works *as art* began to grow. Subsequently, scholars began to take the works seriously as art, and developed a language and concepts of aesthetics appropriate to their character. In conformity with expectations associated with fine art in the late 19th century, they applied criteria of authenticity, purity, rarity to tribal arts. The often recent creation of the works impeded their full assimilation into the Western aesthetic, but this could be overcome if the peoples from whom the works stemmed were dispersed, extinct, or if their culture had ceased to exist.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Museums discover primitive art**

The entry of new forms of art into art museums is an historically situated process that varies from one nation to another. It is important to remember that museums as we know them were created largely in the 19th century. We must

also remember that the appropriateness of certain kinds of works for museum collections is the result of social, political, and economic processes of negotiation (DiMaggio, 1987). These considerations are patent when it comes to new forms of art. New art, however, is not always newly made. It may be work that has existed for a long time, 'unrecognized' as Art. Under this heading may be included practical, manufactured products exhibited in science and technology museums, or segregated in industrial design departments in art museums, on the margins of Art. The furnishings that compose period rooms of museums are merely old versions of this species of craft. The older and rarer, the more valuable and the less 'minor' they are considered by art historians, collectors, and other art world participants (Alsop, 1982). Because of their practical function, they are conceived of not only as having aesthetic merit, but also ethnographic interest. Whereas an ethnographic rationale is the criterion applicable to decorative arts in historic houses or history museums, aesthetic quality pertains to art museums. Once there, the works reach the pinnacle of social valuation and legitimacy. No longer are they relegated to the domain of the merely functional or useful.

Usefulness is not in and of itself a barrier to aesthetic legitimacy. Clearly, works from the distant past, especially from classical Greece and Rome, whether furniture, pottery, architectural fragments or statuary, have long been defined as legitimate cultural objects of great value. Their aura, enhanced by their rediscovery (or invention) as a central aesthetic element of the Renaissance, gives these works special standing. But age alone is not enough. New World artefacts, regardless of complexity and sophistication, even those coming from the civilizations of pre-Columbian America, have lagged in achieving a similar status. As a result, many of these works are found in ethnography

departments of natural history museums or archaeological museums rather than in art museums.<sup>12</sup>

Another category of manufacture is the material output of peripheral subcultures ('little traditions') of European or other countries. Works of this kind, defined as artefacts or decorative objects, are collected in folk art museums or departments of general art museums. Lacking the prestige of 'high' or courtly civilizations, their presence in museums at all is legitimated by an ethnographic rationale, as representative of a 'people'. Their aesthetic quality is reduced to 'charm' and 'craftsmanship' rather than 'transcendence' or 'universalism' in the Kantian sense (Bourdieu, 1984).

Among the more recent arrivals in the precincts of art museums, from the late 19th century on, are works of African peoples. Almost regardless of function, they embody sacred as well as secular symbols, often intersecting in the same objects. Decades after their entry into ethnographic collections, when African works were beginning – haltingly – to be treated as aesthetic objects, they began to find their way into art museums. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, acquired some 'odd' objects that 'drifted in' as early as 1889, according to a curator (Zolberg, 1974, p. 119), in the same year that the Paris Universal Exposition displayed Oceanic objects and a few Ashanti works from West Africa (Goldwater, 1986, p. 317). As in most art museums at the time, the objects ended up in storage, even though some were fine pre-Columbian gold works. This drifting in of miscellaneous objects was typical of a pattern in which nearly anything offered to an art museum, especially by socially prominent patrons, was accepted. In Chicago, the fact that they drifted into the Art Institute may have been due to the circumstance that the Field Museum of Natural History was not

founded until over a decade later. But merely being in a museum collection did not give them prominence. Lacking an aesthetic framework, intellectual rationale, or conventions surrounding them, in Chicago these works were doomed for decades to obscurity. Although, given the overcrowded collections of many museums, obscurity is frequently the fate of individual art works, in this case (and for a few other genres) it was an entire category that was relegated to the 'attic'.

An aesthetic framework of sorts began to be developed from the turn of the century on, as individual collectors, some of them artists (Vlaminck, Matisse, Picasso, Derain) acquired items of African or other sculpture, and incorporated certain primitive stylistic elements in their own creations (Goldwater, 1986, p. 317). In 1909 Alfred Stieglitz exhibited African sculpture in his 291 Gallery in New York. At the same time, Belgian ethnographic collections were being redeployed with some attention to aesthetic considerations. Serious books on African sculpture *qua art* began to appear in Germany, New York, Paris, London, along with more exhibitions in galleries and museums. The increasing frequency and density of European scholarship and exhibitions interacted with similar activities in the United States. By 1923 the first museum exhibit of African art ('Primitive Negro Sculpture') took place at the Brooklyn Museum (Goldwater, 1986, p. 318). Those works and others traveled throughout the United States, including to the Art Institute of Chicago (Zolberg, 1974).

Still, the rise of primitive works to the status of art did not follow immediately upon their exhibition at the art museum. Looking at the Art Institute's collecting and exhibiting history reveals a process of gradual valorization of these works. As early as 1927 a group of African carvings from the travelling

exhibitions of New York's Harlem Museum was exhibited in the Art Institute's Children's Museum. Having been purchased by a Chicago patron, who subsequently donated them to the museum, they continued on exhibit until the 1950s – but still in the Children's Museum! Without denying the legitimating importance of the museum's acceptance of the African art gift *qua art* at so early a date, their location in the less prestigious department shows that the works were still far from the pinnacle of aesthetic value as defined by Clifford. Nevertheless, the rationale offered by the museum conformed to the aesthetic connotations that nearly three decades of effort had fostered: 'In these days [referring to the late 1920s] when artists like Picasso, Friesz, Modigliani and Vlaminck are gaining permanent representation in those art museums where the authorities venture to exhibit what they consider great modern paintings, it seems most fitting to exhibit as well examples of those aesthetically significant wood carvings of the African negroes which admittedly have had an influence on modern art. Few museums which do not pretend to be primarily ethnological in their interests seem to have felt sufficiently the sound artistic value of such carvings to place them side by side with the artistic creations of the civilized world' [sic] (Zolberg, 1974, p. 224).

After the 1950s, relegation of primitive art to the children's section ended. Instead, as with all museum art, if the Junior Museum desired it for exhibit its director would have to request the loan as a favor from the curator.<sup>13</sup>

Although there was no boom in growth, neither did the collection stagnate. In 1933 a Benin plaque fragment was 'fortuitously purchased', a few Melanesian objects were donated in 1952. In a different area, two collections of Peruvian art were exhibited in 1954, one of which was purchased by the

museum, the other accepted as a gift from a new donor. The museum underlined its commitment to this collection of 'new' art by dispatching an assistant curator for Decorative Arts to Peru in order to learn the art's context. Having by this time accumulated relatively substantial holdings, the Art Institute created a new Department of Primitive Art, supported by a special committee of museum patrons. A year later, in 1956, the museum exhibited the African sculpture collection of one of the committee members 'to encourage interest and indicate directions in the Art Institute's expanding program of primitive art.' The following year the assistant curator, by then trained in the field, was made full curator of Primitive Art, and during the following year assigned an assistant.

With the structure of staff and patronage in place, the museum featured several exhibitions, the most important of which was a collaborative effort with the Chicago Natural History Museum (the Field Museum) and 40 private collectors. They hailed the event in the following terms: 'The collecting of primitive art has become increasingly important as connoisseurs have recognized the artistic validity of works which had previously been only of concern to anthropologists, and this exhibition will demonstrate the great interest Chicagoans have shown in these exotic arts' (Zolberg, 1974). By 1965, going beyond the existing department with a floating collection, a permanent Gallery for Primitive Art was established and a catalogue published. Its aims were modest, disavowing any intention on the Art Institute's part of competing with art already well represented in the Field Museum of Natural History. Rather than solicit Melanesian and Polynesian works, the Art Institute would emphasize African and Middle American archaeology. In fact, however, the limitations were even more stringent because

competition from other museums and collectors for African art was increasing to such an extent that the actual focus would have to be on Central and South America. Ironically, if there were still any doubts about the high valuation that museum acquisition of such works certified, the rise of theft, forgery, and dishonest practices confirmed their value.

#### **New art, new patrons: the modalities of incorporation**

The Art Institute of Chicago (founded between 1879-82) had in its early decades gained a reputation for receptiveness to new art<sup>14</sup>, but the emergence of a great variety of art styles in the 1960s, many explicitly anti-art and anti-museum in form (Crane, 1987), strained its 'openness.' The dazzling effects of Op-Art, the cartoon-like, overtly commercial character of Pop-Art, the opacity to understanding of minimalism, and especially the 'non-art' of conceptual art would have been difficult pills to swallow under any circumstances. In the newer Art Institute, which had adopted established standards of quality for its permanent collection, its exhibits demanded more space and less crowding, all occasioning greater expense. As a result, the permissible limits of risk-taking in acquiring speculative stylistic innovations were narrowed. Furthermore, relationships between the museum and patrons who were also collectors, eager for museum acceptance for their works and influence in its governance, created new opportunities as well as strains.

In modern times the relationship between artist and patron has been transformed through the intermediation of other groups. These include dealers and critics, acting as gatekeepers (Crane, 1987), as well as museums. Since the gates need to be opened both to new types of art and new types of patrons, the acceptance of new or unusual art is virtually inseparable from

the entry of new social elites into regularized patronage roles in the museum. As in most other American cultural institutions, this is evident in the Art Institute where cooptation of new art, new elites, and new money go together. While in past times patrons might have a direct effect on art styles through contact with the artists whose works they commissioned, they have tended to become consumers of pre-selected work in a variety of styles defined by the artist, but funneled through other intermediaries.

The rise of particular social groups to wealth, and their concurrent desire for equilibrating status/honor with economic success at a time of artistic diversity combine within existing organizations, such as museums, to create competition for entry of new forms of art into the public arena of high culture, along with validation of social status aspirations by patrons. This is particularly clear in the virtual exclusion from important lay positions (boards of trustees, et cetera) of Jews and Catholics until the 1960s, when the dominant position of the Art Institute of Chicago was challenged by the founding of the Museum of Contemporary Art. It is not that there were no Jewish patrons in the museum's governing body, but the few who served tended to be unobtrusive, and largely of German Jewish background, whereas the new status aspirants were more likely to be of Eastern European origin. Rather than acquire old masters, they were more likely to collect works in the styles that challenged the hegemony of formalist abstract art. This is particularly true for the 'speculative' collecting that some of them did: pre-Columbian art, Native American art, modern art. Threatened with the loss of wealthy patrons and their collections (largely of modern art), the Art Institute's director, who was committed to modernism, created patron committees on which they might serve as a

stepping stone to trusteeship.

Among the latest groups to be solicited as patrons by most American art museums are African Americans. This is similarly the case for African American artists. Given the size of Chicago's African American population, and the relatively large middle and upper middle class of which it is composed, it may seem surprising that the Art Institute had tended to play a decidedly modest role in bringing them into its honorific and governing positions. Although the Art Institute has long included the works of African American artists (e.g., H.O. Tanner, since the early 1900s), and in group shows, especially under federal support programs (the New Deal; during World War II; and as part of Great Society programs of President Lyndon Johnson) the first major one-person show of a black artist's work took place only in 1971.<sup>15</sup>

Richard Hunt, an African American sculptor with a national and international reputation, had exhibited in the popular 'Crossroads Gallery' of the Art Institute; been invited to take part in the Meet-the-Artist Program (a part of the educational mission to introduce the work of American artists to its members); was named a member of the Illinois Arts Council when it was established; served on the jury for the Art Institute's American Show of 1972. Under the sponsorship of one of the most prominent African American businessmen in the city (a publishing magnate), his one-person show became a gala affair. Shortly thereafter Hunt, who had already received commissions of a number of relatively small public sculptures, was commissioned to create a major public work for the city. Not surprisingly, the Art Institute soon invited his patron to take a seat on the board of trustees. In so doing the museum was somewhat belatedly following the lead of the other cultural institutions of the city: the Lyric Opera, the Symphony, and the

Museum of Contemporary Art, all of which had African American trustees by this time.

Introducing the subject of a well known sculptor whose works are made according to a Western aesthetic of abstraction or surrealism may seem to be a digression from the primitive or tribal art that my paper deals with. In fact, however, in recent years the two have not been totally disconnected. Black artists have tended to be faced with alternate career strategies that they translate into aesthetic choices. In the domain of literature, as Wendy Griswold points out, writers from Third World countries too are faced with aesthetic choices: between 'universalistic' (a human aesthetic), as opposed to an aesthetic particular to a certain country or region (a 'social aesthetic'). The human aesthetic, with its universal aura, is attractive to Western publishers and audiences, enhancing their chance of attaining 'insider' status where artistic power is currently concentrated. Paradoxically, however, this success is likely to make them 'outsiders' to their own native communities (Griswold, 1990).

This raises the question of whether one aesthetic choice or the other deviates from the 'authenticity' raised as a criterion of quality by certain Western critics. There is an implication of inauthenticity in the distinction made by Robert Goldwater when he distinguishes between the art of the primitives and the primitivistic art of Western artists who are 'inspired by' tribal artists. James Clifford's analysis makes it clear that Goldwater and others assume a certain essentialist nature in their classification of art. They tend to accept the elements of these works that Western artists, such as Gauguin or the Expressionists, translated into Western forms. Moreover, they insist that even these elements, no matter how much importance is attributed to them by the artists themselves, are no more than starting points for further development by the *individual*

European artist.

Interestingly, Goldwater makes no reference at all to the possibility that currently existing, non-primitive artists need to be considered. He ignores recent works made for the 'trade' (touristy 'airport art'); art by African American artists who make aesthetic choices that are inspired by 'tribal' or 'primitive' art. These omissions are not surprising, since in the first case art made for tourists is rarely treated as worthy of analysis.<sup>16</sup> The second case represents the nearly total exclusion until recently of African American artists from the 'universalist' conception of fine art. The situation is beginning to change, but in the negotiated conflict still under way, victory cannot as yet be assigned to insiders or aspiring outsiders. Nevertheless, aesthetic debates in recent years suggest that change is on the way, as both museums and the public increasingly consider the works of 'outsiders' as worthwhile.

#### **On the edge of acceptance: current status**

Although museums had not led the way in changing the tastes that eventually granted legitimacy to primitive art, as Goldwater pointed out, they had gathered the raw materials making that shift possible. Interrupted by World War I, two decades of artistic acceptance of primitive artefacts ensued. Later, as he put it, 'undoubtedly hastened by the establishment of the former colonies as independent nations and the accompanying transformation of their traditional cultures under the impact of modern technology and economy (...) with only a few exceptions the primitive arts became arts of the past (in some cases the very recent past), and thus lost part of their previous function as documentation of contemporary primitive cultures.' This statement refers to the appropriation of the primitive into the Western domain of aesthetic value, accompanied by the

development of concepts of formal values, expressive power, detailed examination of their social and psychological meanings (Goldwater, 1986, pp. 12-13).

Primitive art has passed through a 'career trajectory' during which it was assigned a domicile in an art museum rather than natural history collections, as in Nelson Rockefeller's donation of his Museum of Primitive Art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972; housed in the new National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in 1979-81; added via the Michael Rockefeller Wing to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1982; placed in specialized art museums, as in the Center (now, Museum) for African Art in New York in 1983. It has been hailed by critics, who viewed it as a major corrective to the loss of 'standards' that came to afflict contemporary art after Abstract Expressionism (Canaday, 1972). In the season of 1972, African statues and other art works, and a collection of nineteenth century Navajo blankets were simultaneously on view at three leading New York museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Museum, serving as 'a lovely sock in the teeth' for doubters (Canaday, 1972).<sup>17</sup> By 1984 in an extravagant display of primitive arts at the Museum of Modern Art, the entire range of aestheticized expressions of the art of 'the others' was brought into conjunction with the West. The rationale for the MOMA exhibit was constructed around the purported 'affinities' between these art worlds, seemingly divorced from one another. The organizers implied that some common roots bound together artists as diverse as European avant-gardists and timeless-seeming works from distant places. This idea has been attacked as wrong-headed and dishonest, because it is based on assumptions of a universalist, decontextualized aesthetics (Danto, 1987).

It would be a mistake, however, to view the

progression from private collections, through natural historical or anthropological interpretation, to aesthetic appreciation, as a process taking place in a vacuum, with no influence on contemporary artists, and in which the agency of interested supporters, including artists themselves, played no role. The incorporation of works into the category of art is a complex process which is driven by market forces, rising status groups, and the choices of aspiring artists. Aestheticizing critics have preferred to emphasize the aspects of primitive arts that have universalist propensities, whereas artists who identify themselves with the cultural traditions of what they consider their ancestors seek to rediscover and elaborate what they can find of them. When the African American anthropologist and dancer Kathryn Dunham introduced an American black idiom to a wide public in the United States and abroad in the 1940s, as the dance critic Anna Kisselgoff noted, 'she was ahead of her time'. Before the idea of 'Negritude' and 'Third World' came to intellectual light, she was bringing to American blacks the heritage that for nearly three centuries had been denied them (Kisselgoff, 1972). Her combination of art with anthropology enabled her to create a niche for a new art form. The problem is far greater for artists trying to break into an already established field.

Black painters and sculptors faced a gallery-critic system that had become committed to an aesthetic inimical to what they were striving to do. It excluded what was defined as reminiscences or more generally, content-laden, a factor that contributed to the considerable difficulty that African American artists have had in breaking into the world of dealerships, funding, media, and in finding a public (Pindell, 1989; 1990). Michael Brenson, critic for the *New York Times*, observed in writing about a show entitled 'Next Generation:

Southern Black Esthetic' held at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, that 'the presence of Africa can be felt throughout the show, but in ways that are rarely obvious or insistent.' Just as important as aesthetic form is the black American experience, especially of a political sort (Brenson, 1990).<sup>18</sup> The point is that artists of color, who identify with a Third World origin, or generally are subject to discrimination by dominant groups in their societies, are now using their art to attain a degree of empowerment that has long been denied them. During the early 1970s if artists such as these had presented themselves at museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago, they would have gently and patronizingly been told to go elsewhere. Now, after having to fight for changes in the art worlds that they face, seeking alternative routes or creating them if they are absent, they are no longer passive, but have become active participants in engaging the opportunity structures they confront. If need be they help to change the criteria or standards of an art world unable to find aesthetic reasons to exclude them because of its total openness to stylistic changes, narrative, and styles that have come to prominence since the demise of the hegemony of abstraction.

#### **Conclusions**

As a sign of the recognition of the aims of artists who sympathize or identify with, or even trace their origin to a Third World source, a set of exhibits organized as a collaborative project of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem took place in New York City. Called 'The Decade Show' it was subtitled 'Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s', and dealt with such topics as socially conscious art, 'border culture', or multiculturalism, identity and freedom. A three-way conversation among

the three museum directors served as introduction to the catalogue. Marcia Tucker of The New Museum pointed out that the idea of the 'decade' would probably be very different if the curators had been representative of the homogeneous 'white, very male, very mainstream view of what happened during the eighties. My sense of it was a much more slippery, heterogeneous, complicated, and difficult one. My idea included work of people who were invisible in the mainstream but who seemed to be really critical to an understanding of the period.' Nilda Peraza of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art (MoCHA) agreed, adding that for her the decade 'saw the move out of obscurity of what I call the "parallel cultures" and "parallel aesthetics" (Rubin, 1990). This parallel aesthetics coexists with the mainstream, which continues to try to exclude it. Rather than try to enter the mainstream, Ms. Peraza aimed to create 'a very generous and open art environment in this country, one that will allow and accept artists from all backgrounds, without stereotyping and pigeonholing'. Finally, Kinshasha Conwill, director of The Studio Museum in Harlem, generally supported their orientation. Yet even though her museum was established to serve the people of Harlem and African American artists, she found value in the Decade Show because 'it is integrally a part of a critical look at the artists that we deal with on a regular basis and artists that we don't deal with regularly'. By participating in this issue-oriented set of exhibits, she hoped to engage with other cultures (Rubin, 1990, pp. 9-10).

Nevertheless, despite the apparent consensus among the three directors on many issues, the project retained ambiguities. These emerge when Marcia Tucker recalled Ms. Conwill's reaction to the aim of the New Museum to 'break apart the "canon", so to speak, to position itself in opposition to or outside of the

mainstream [Ms. Conwill] joked, "Well you guys want to get rid of the canon just at the moment when we are about to enter it!"' (Rubin, 1990, p. 11). This is an important point, since it highlights the continuation of the opposition between the strategies and aesthetic choices of artists: 'universality', meaning in social terms, white, male-dominated, elite oriented; 'social', implying loyalty to one's (presumed) 'roots' and avoidance of entanglement with dominant society that seems to be the main path to success.

This question pervades the art of many previous outsiders, whether 'primitive' or feminist or conceptual in aim. What they face is the absorptive capacity of the mainstream that is capable of incorporating many of them, one at a time, and ultimately weakening the cohesiveness on which so much of socially committed artistic expression is based. Whether this is to be seen as success or failure must be the next chapter to be studied.

\* This article is based on a paper for the *World Congress of Sociology*, Madrid, July 8-13, 1990.

#### Notes

1. The concept 'art world' was formulated by Howard S. Becker (1982). It encompasses the collectively developed activities of artists and others who work in one of the specialized domains of the arts. A rough division of labor characterizes their roles in these worlds: as producers, distributors, consumers.
2. Among other things, outsider art includes the art of the 'insane' (Gilman, 1985; Bowler, 1990), folk art (Rosenberg, 1974), children's drawings (Goldwater, 1986). In recent times the category is used loosely to include works created for 'alternative spaces' or made of unconventional materials (Cinquina, 1989).
3. For a classic study of the different interpretations of the 'primitive' by specific artists and movements, see Goldwater. Among more recent works, the catalogues for a major (and controversial) exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Rubin, 1984) and that for an exhibit at the African Art Center (*ART/Artifact*, 1988) raise questions about the validity of meanings attached to the idea of the primitive.
4. The major exception, even though he is concerned with broader questions, is James Clifford. His analysis of collecting, the assumptions, procedures, and definitions of the primitive by important anthropologists, and the struggle of certain of the subject peoples to create new identities in modern conditions is a major contribution to the analysis of postmodernism and a challenge to social science more generally.
5. Goldwater had published the first edition of his book in 1938; the second, revised edition appeared in 1966; and the expanded edition of 1986 includes two additional essays, written between 1969 and 1973.
6. Much of the process as revealed in his study of museography or museumification of tribal or primitive works is guided by the ideas of Jean Baudrillard as applied by A.J. Greimas.
7. Process in this case refers to the fact that when African objects are used as religious 'fetishes', they are not preserved but are intentionally permitted to molder, eventually to be replaced by newly made works. In the case of works that have become part of Western collections (or now in African museums), however, every effort is made to conserve them as close to intact objects as possible.
8. It is interesting to note that when objects are assigned to the category of technology or science, they have tended to be viewed as less important than aesthetic objects. Why this should be the case has not been thoroughly analyzed. The fact, as Clifford notes and as has been recognized by museum administrators, is that it is easier for art museums to raise funds from donors than science museums. One response to this problem has been to revise the rationale of displays and the selection of objects with aesthetics as a central criteria. One of these criteria is that of 'authenticity'

- the original object rather than a replica. When natural history museums began, their didactic emphasis for a general public permitted them to display replicas and models. To enhance their value today, they are likely to feature original works (the actual pithecanthropus and other prehistoric skulls rather than models), display them as if they were precious stones in a fashionable jewelry store (the Hope Diamond and many other 'examples' of mineralogy at the American Museum of Natural History).
9. This underlies the Gothic revival in architecture and medievalism more generally in the nineteenth century, which appealed to certain intellectuals (e.g., William Morris), their supporters and patrons.
  10. When made of precious metals, as in the case of the arts of the American civilizations, they were frequently melted down into coins. Christian missionaries, at first, burned what they considered religious fetishes, until they began to see that they had value on the curio or art market (Torgovnick, 1990, p. 19).
  11. There is no way to, nor should one, diminish the horror contained in this statement. The elimination of numerous peoples on the African continent, of enormous numbers of the native peoples of the American continents are matched in modern Europe by the genocide practiced against the Jews. With respect to the arts, the project of the Nazis to create a museum of an 'extinct race' in Prague represents a highpoint of cynicism in this unmitigated evil.
  12. Even today the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has collections of 'lesser' civilizations, such as pre-Columbian works, Tibetan objects, similar examples of which later entered the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.
  13. The department known as the Children's Museum had its name changed a number of times in the Art Institute's history.
  14. This was particularly true for its acceptance of gifts of Impressionist and Postimpressionist paintings quite early. Despite opposition from certain quarters, the museum welcomed temporary exhibits of controversial art, such as the Armory Show of 1913 (Zolberg, 1974).
  15. Among the founders and prominent patrons of the Art Institute were a number of devoted supporters of the Union during the Civil War. Black art students were admitted to its school around the turn of the century and were defended by the administration and trustees even when white students objected to their presence. This is worth bearing in mind in light of recent conflicts between the Art Institute School and the African American community of Chicago in the 1980s (Dubin, 1989).
  16. Aside from the leading 'founding father' of cultural anthropology, Franz Boas, one of the leading

exceptions to this pattern is Bennetta Jules-Rosette, an African American anthropologist (Jules-Rosette, 1983, pp. 443-466). Most recently, Sally Price has shown that contemporary artists among the Maroons of Surinam have adapted themselves to the demands of tourist buyers (Price, 1990).

17. That year was not the first in which those museums had shown this kind of work, but rarely had the density of African and Native American art been so noticeable. The MOMA had put on an exhibition of 'American Sources of Modern Art: Aztec, Mayan, Incan'; African sculpture in 1933; Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa; 'African Sculpture'; and launched a Harlem educational outreach program in 1935 (Lynes, 1973, pp. 441-442; p. 448; p. 450). I have already referred to the Brooklyn Museum exhibit in the 1920s. At the Art Institute of Chicago, by the end of the 1970s, the department of Primitive Art had been replaced by the arts of Africa, the Americas and Oceania.
18. The Center may now be best known for its annual Awards in the Visual Arts exhibition, especially the 1988 prize given to Andres Serrano, whose photograph of a Crucifix in urine has led to an extraordinary resurgence of conservative attempts to censor artists and end government subsidies to creative artists in the United States.

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#### Vera Zolberg

taught in the Sociology Department of the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in 1992 and has written extensively on the sociology of art museums and cultural institutions, censorship of arts, art criticism, American and French cultural policy, and how these structures and practices contribute to the designation of Works as Art.