

Ian Bourland

Exile
On Canal
Street

Brendan Fernandes has an innate understanding of the idiosyncratic flows of Lower Manhattan. The glowing neon masks that announced his exhibition *From Hiz Hands* in the winter of 2011 seamlessly resonated with the strange brew of African buskers, Asian small businesses, and touristic consumption that surrounds Art in General, and which are threaded together by polyglot chatter and the steady march of bodies pulsing down Canal Street. The gallery's window, radiating amid back-alley movie sets and the flow of workers from the nearby Canal Street subway station, could easily have been mistaken for the storefront of countless vendors of "authentic" crafts and *fugazi* jewelry, which is perhaps what Fernandes intended.¹

As a resident at the Whitney ISP he was immersed in this microsystem of the city, which draws people like him—those from far corners of the globe—together under the sign of commerce. In so doing, however, Fernandes's project concisely deconstructed the knowledge systems by which "African" art produces and acquires meaning, and underscored the tentativeness of Africaness as such in both the field of contemporary art, and in the deeper trajectories of modernity. The connectedness of his objects to their immediate environment, and the ambivalent kitsch of their materiality were essential to their effectiveness. In short,

it is important that these masks and what they signify could be taken for granted.

But if you knew better, or if you were simply entranced by the neon recreations of Bamana and Waniama² masks that Fernandes discovered in the archives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art³ (bequests of the Nelson Rockefeller estate), you might have stepped inside, only to be greeted by an installation not of objects, but of sound. The looped, ten-minute piece alternated between several characters, at times in dialogue, periodically overlaid with what could be called stereotypically "tribal," rhythmic chanting. Here a young woman offers historical insights, or speaks in the unaccented and precise meter of the rational expert; here something like Fernandes himself—the cosmopolitan young Westerner—interacts with a deep-voiced street

1 Fernandes's artist's statement and biography can be found online at <http://brendanfernandes.ca/>.

2 For more on these, see Patrick R. McNaughton's classic article "Bamana Blacksmiths," *African Arts* 12 (February 1979), pp. 65–66, 68–71, and Jean-Paul Colley and Laurie Ann Farrell, "Bamana: The Art of Existence," *African Arts* 34 (Winter 2001), pp. 16–31. For a brief discussion of "Voltaic" masks, see Christopher D. Roy, "The Spread of Mask Styles in the Black Volta Basin," *African Arts* 20 (August 1987), pp. 40–47.

3 Brendan Fernandes, correspondence with the author, July 16, 2011.

vendor of African artifacts, who in turn speaks in the confident malapropism of pidgin English.

These voices collectively tell a story by way of sonic mosaic, the story of Buli. The Buli Master, of course, is obscure even to Africanists, and the name seems to be drawn from an accession record from the Met for a nineteenth-century stool carved for the Luba peoples of the Congo. Within western sub-Saharan Africa, variations on this type of stool can be found in many traditional societies. It can indicate the prestige, if not outright royalty, of its bearer—in other words the

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- 4 The issue of authorship and naming is a fraught, and well-discussed within scholarly and curatorial circles. The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Luba, in particular, are well-known exceptions, as they themselves developed complex mnemonic systems and records of royal leaders. Nonetheless, artistic identity among the Luba conflates previous “incarnations” of royal artists with those working closer to the present—according to Mary Nooter Roberts, the “Western modernist” notion of individual creativity cannot be grafted on these carvers. Moreover, Luba art was collected on a large scale by Euro-American institutions, usually without provenance records that include the name of the artist. See “The Naming Game: Ideologies of Luba Artistic Identity,” *African Arts* 31 (Autumn 1998), pp. 56–73.

object had a precise use, rather than an aesthetic value. Its producer was, apparently, said Buli Master. That we know this artist’s name—or ascribe the stool to an individual at all—is uncommon: African art is classified by dealers and institutions such as the Met as work that predates the colonial incursions of the late nineteenth century, and that was made in a consistent local style for use by the particular group. This is light years from Western conventions of originality and artistic genius. By naming the Buli Master, we grant individual agency and intent, and in so doing, we risk a rapid slide into chaos. If “primitive” African cultures are and were aggregations of talented individuals, what becomes of our neat natural histories and taxonomies of those most exotic of others?⁴

Such a problem is also at the heart of the emergence in recent decades of “contemporary African art.” On the one hand, vendors from Lower Manhattan to Lagos sell mass-produced reproductions of Dogon masks and Asante figurines for the tourist trade, and such work, broadly, is lumped together as “African.” Yet, this work is deracinated from its traditional function, or even the geographic boundaries in which it was ostensibly produced. On the other hand, artists of African descent, from Fernandes to Julie Mehretu, Chris Ofili to Wangechi Mutu, are asked to speak to and for an “authentic” heritage, signs of a static African culture to be translated into their work.⁵ Fernandes’s argument here is that such simplistic conceptions of African collectivity cannot hold, and he wants to show us how

such categories arise.

One way into this problem of Africanity is his pairing of the Buli Master's story with his concrete reproductions of western African masks, two of which can be attributed to the Bamana peoples of Mali, another—the grotesque, checkered hyena face—to a group in Burkina Faso; none of these three are attributed to an individual artist, all three would have been used in regular masquerade ceremonies. The green, four-pronged piece is a reproduction of the Ntomo mask, typically worn by young Bamana men as part of a process of ethical education in adolescence; the horned “cow,” in turn, likely invokes the zoomorphic masks of the Komo society of elite, spiritually advanced artisans (blacksmiths) resident in those villages.

The rounded Hyena mask is an outlier here, depicting as it does a spirit from the “bush” in animal form, but for a group separated from the Bamana both by geographic and linguistic distance, and their own cultural specificity. But in a museum setting, placed

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- 5 Critic Olu Oguibe's collected essays *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis, 2004) teases out the complex relationships that emerged in the nineties between collectors, institutions, and African artists, the latter, he argues, were forced to perform an primitivist, essentialized version of their “authentic” (read anthropologically or stereotypically sanctioned) versions of themselves.

in the African and Oceanic section, presented stiffly in sterile vitrines, these objects take on a sameness—they can, as in *From His Hands*, be understood as equivalents, data points in a larger framework of “different from us.” Of course, these are all, like many of the objects absorbed into the Western art historical and anthropological apparatus, taken from the western sections of the African continent, and have nothing to do with life elsewhere in that great landmass, in Cairo or Cape Town, and especially Mombasa or Nairobi. Fernandes signals this disjuncture in the sound piece. At one point a passerby asks the vendor about the provenance of the work for sale, noting that he himself is “from the East,” (this seems to be Fernandes himself, referencing his Kenyan childhood in an unaccented, flat tone); the vendor answers that he does not know, but that it is “from Africa,” an assurance of authenticity and exoticness worthless to experts, but thrilling to casual buyers. In this simple exchange, Fernandes foregrounds important critical insights from the nineties: on the one hand, Africanist Christopher Steiner's argument that kitsch tourist art is valuable as art in one section of the economy, but that African artifacts can only be considered art if they were never intended as art to begin with, but later validated as such by the colonially infused systems of museal and anthropological expertise.⁶ On

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- 6 See Steiner's *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge, 1994).

the other hand, Fernandes's subtle query about the origin of the street object (that he bargains down to a scant twenty dollars) concretizes philosopher and Duke University professor V.Y. Mudimbe's larger contention that Africa itself is a product of a Western imaginary, and gains solidity through its continual naming as such by the proper voices.⁷

These slippages are underscored by Fernandes's own position as an artist of Kenyan descent, who came of age and was educated primarily in Ontario. Kenya is typically underrepresented in the area of African antiquities (a fact alluded to in a recent fictional piece by Binyavanga Wainaina,⁸ in which a potentially fake set of Kenyan artifacts is brought to light by a European photographer). Yet here he is, the "African" artist, relying on objects pulled from their original context in western Africa and given a static identity as precolonial relic by the Met. They are then further blurred in Fernandes's own reimagining, which renders them in the crass colors and materiality of American vernacular culture—in this case they may as well be flickering Budweiser signs blinking steadily outside the corner bar or 99 cent store. But this repurposing unexpectedly reinvigorates the objects: for one, they make us wonder whether they can

7 In, for example, his Foucault-influenced volume *The Idea of Africa* (African Systems of Thought) (Bloomington, 1994).

8 "Pure Product," *Harper's* (June 2007), pp. 19–23.

properly be called contemporary or traditional, part of a deeper cultural archive or the imaginary of Fernandes himself. Moreover, by shifting the masks into the realm of advertisement and commodity, these light sculptures skew the artificial distinction between high and low art alluded to in the exchanges between protagonists in the sound piece—as part of an *Art in General* installation they are properly art, but their symbolic associations, both the West African mask as a stand in for African art more broadly, and the low-brow materiality of the neon window dressing mark them off as the cheap reproductions hawked in the streets of New York and Venice,⁹ and certainly in any large African city.

Ironically, Fernandes's reconstruction of these disparate masks also restores them to their proper function: here they entice, beguile, and announce a heady sound installation within, rather than sitting in dusty archives or Plexiglas boxes. Here too, the fetishistic value of the original masks—their investment by the social structure with disproportionate power—

9 Artist Fred Wilson incorporated African street vendors, for example, in his 2003 installation for the United States at the 2003 Venice Biennale. The performative aspects of the work, paired with black Venetian sculptural objects shed light on the complex historical and contemporary cultural and economic relays between Europe and western Africa.

is restored, but this time in the form of commodity fetishism, the recognition that contemporary social relations are mediated by the illusory value of objects of exchange. Indeed, in this overheated art economy, which thrives on the proper provenance of a work and its validation by expert opinion, Fernandes's spectacular recasting of these original fetish objects as glimmering icons takes on a peculiar resonance. This is an important intervention now, as contemporary African art as a sub-market is further sutured into the broader field of avant-garde art production.¹⁰ With remarkable economy of means, *From Hiz Hands* suggests that not only is the rubric of "African" art a fragile construction, but such an art should properly concern itself with historical flows of power and their attendant regimes of knowledge, rather than pat questions of identity or "authentic" cultural patrimonies.

The idea of the fetish is of particular interest here, and unlocks the deeper significance of *From Hiz Hands*. Rich in psychoanalytic associations, fetish stemmed

from anthropological accounts of a variety of traditional material cultures that relied on the production of "power objects."¹¹ The Bamana are one such group, and Luba stools, too, can be seen in this way. Nonetheless, the term carried with it profound hierarchical implications, and marked off primitive cultures against which a "rational" west increasingly defined itself. Breaking from the Freudian uses of the term, theorist Homi Bhabha argued that Western experts (such as those at the Met) engaged in a sort of fetishism of their own, by which they "fixed" the parameters and meanings of then alien groups of people. The logic is that not only are Western viewers fascinated by difference, they are also repulsed by it. As if that neurotic relationship were not enough, Euro-Americans relied on the existence of those others in order to define themselves: not dark, not primitive, not guided by emotion or superstition. New images and narratives of, for example, Africa could keep wildly distinct people and places in suspension, at once close at hand but in always at a slight remove, never the "real" thing, but a useful myth thereof.¹²

10 Consider, for example, the emergence of several galleries that specialize in primarily contemporary African work, the addition of many African "diaspora" artists to the rosters of blue chip galleries, and the record yields for an Africa show at the Phillips de Pury auction house in 2010. See the results online at: <http://www.phillipsdepurys.com/auctions.aspx?sn=NY000310>.

11 For a thorough account see William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," RES 9 (Spring 1985), pp. 5–17.

12 In *The Location of Culture* (London, 2004), especially the essay "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," pp. 66–84.

The collection and display of Mande and Luba art helped to perpetuate such conceptions. In the realm of modern art the analogous process was called “primitivism,” the operations by which Picasso gazed upon a Pende mask at the Trocadero museum and synthesized it into his iconic *Desmoiselles d’Avignon*, or by which Gauguin aimed to isolate the primordial human drives and translate them into suggestive, coarsely rendered paintings during his voyages to the South Pacific. African and Oceanic objects (and people) were thus removed from their context and reduced to their symbolic essence, as stand-ins for an idealized—fetishized—vision of the then-frontiers of the modern world.¹³ This story repeats in the work of European surrealists, early Abstract Expressionism, and in a remarkable twist, in the demands by the market on African artists themselves to perpetuate such fantasies in their work.

In pulling such masks from the museal archive and pushing them further, into their endgame as pure symbolic commodities, Fernandes reawakens this history of modern art and, in so doing, forces us to question our own presuppositions about the illusory boundaries between Western and African art both past and present. But it is the hypnotic stanzas of the voices within that ultimately twist the knife. The calm, clear

voice of authoritative knowledge is undercut from below by a mellifluous sing-song, her declarative statements deflated by the cavalier geographic confusion and unvarnished hucksterism of the street vendor. Above all, the sense of intertextuality in the recording—of identities overlaid, of syntax warped and stretched, of the syllables of the name Buli being reiterated over and again and driven home—defies the very logic of fetish and fixity. What we have in their place is contingency and play, the evolution of meaning and understanding in real time over and against the stasis of historical or cartographic commonplace.

Which is to say that *From Hiz Hands* is misleadingly simple, with its naïve carnival masks and broken sonic narrative. In one stroke it calls forth decades of poststructural thought, but Fernandes’s willingness to use language and performance to revivify those conversations makes them newly accessible and relevant. As a cosmopolitan and fiercely intelligent young artist he could content himself with work that capitalizes on our persistent yearning for “real” African art, or sidestep questions of identity and location altogether. As one of his narrators reminds us, there is a danger and power lurking in the act of naming, “naming him to locate him in place and time ... mistaken,

13 Discussed in detail in Hal Foster’s essay “‘Primitive’ Scenes,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Autumn 1993), pp. 69–102.

14 See her groundbreaking 2006 essay “The Where of Now,” available online at: <http://www.kein.org/node/64>.

misread, misunderstood, they become something else, they become reproductions ... from in namin' him he comes into existence." Instead, Fernandes opts to steer a course in between, never speaking, as theorist Irit Rogoff would argue,¹⁴ from a conventional geographic or identitarian position but, rather, creating singularities through which the deeper structures that bond us and divide us can be comprehended and, for a brief moment, transcended.