Contemporary Jewellery Practices and the Dialogic Interpretation of African Material Culture

Idané Burger

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Supervisors:

Ernst van der Wal &

Carine Terreblanche

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DECLARATION

By submitting this dissertation, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that production and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Idané Burger

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SUMMARY

In this thesis I examine the extent to which interpretations of African material culture play a role in the creation and visualisation of an 'African aesthetic style' in South African contemporary jewellery practices. My investigation of an 'African aesthetic style' in this thesis is informed by the production, display and writings on African cultural objects. I demonstrate contemporary jewellery design to derive from a critical methodology, particularly as it facilitates a renegotiation of the relationship and dialogue between the producer and viewer of contemporary jewellery objects.

OPSOMMING

In hierdie tesis ondersoek ek die wyse waarop interpretasies van Afrika materiële kultuur 'n rol speel in die skepping en die visualisering van 'n 'Afrika estetiese styl' in Suid-Afrikaanse kontemporêre juwelierspraktyke. My ondersoek van so 'n styl is ingelig deur die produksie en uitstalling van, sowel as diskoerse rondom Afrika kulturele objekte. Ek ondersoek kontemporêre juweliersontwerp as 'n kritiese metodologie, veral ten opsigte van die wyse waarop dit 'n nuwe verhouding tussen die vervaardiger en toeskouer van kontemporêre juweliersobjekte fasiliteer.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I investigate the complex dialogical relationship[1] that often constitutes the reading of African cultural objects. I explore the way in which various processes of dialogue narrate divergent readings of African cultural objects and how all the different (and divergent) contexts that I refer to in this thesis come together in certain forms of contemporary jewellery practices. In particular, I show how the dialogic relationship of modernist, colonial and commercialist discourses and practices, such as jewellery design and museum display practices that draw on the reading and conceptualisation of these objects, have a bearing on the definition of an 'African aesthetic style' – also a loaded term. In order to delineate the interrelationship between African cultural objects and the dialogue that supports readings of them, I show how conversations on these objects are echoed in their display, production and writings on them, in particular as such conversations relate to my own work as a contemporary jewellery design practice.

I argue that both colonial representations of the trope of 'Africanness',[2] be it in colonial and ethnographic exhibitions, or in more contemporary tourist art practices, have led to certain stylistic conventions that are manifested in the dialogue that surrounds African cultural objects, and in particular in contemporary South African jewellery practices.[3] My argument is that the dialogic relations that underscore perceptions and representations of African cultural objects[4]

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[1] My discussion of African cultural objects in thesis claims that the reading of the objects is interrelated with various discourses, display practices and writings that frame the objects. I specifically look at forms of dialogue that are consequently established between the producer, the viewer and the context in which African cultural objects are viewed. I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of dialogism as a continuous process of social interaction, which I incorporate throughout this thesis, on the various aspects of the dialogue around African cultural objects.

[2] I investigate the trope of 'Africanness' as a loaded term throughout my thesis, and I pay particular attention to the polemic around this term in both my theoretical and practical research. It is important to note that this term, like other terms such as an 'African aesthetic style', is sometimes used in an uncritical way in the sources that I consulted, yet I try to reveal that such terms are loaded with contradiction and ambivalence.

[3] During my undergraduate studies, in which I focused on the perception of African art and culture in Western society, I was exposed to a variety of discourses on the trope of 'Africanness' as it is manifested in material culture. This exposure simultaneously inspired me to investigate the notion of 'African' art objects, while it also led me to re-evaluate my own relation to this complex field of material production.

[4] For the purpose of my research I use the terms 'African cultural objects' and 'material culture' to refer to physical objects that are treated or read as evidence of the values and ideas of a particular society or culture.

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have a tremendous bearing on the creation and imagining of an 'African aesthetic style' in South African jewellery design. I trace colonial and commercialist discourses as they have indelibly marked African material culture. In addition, I also demonstrate that some responses in contemporary jewellery design practices to the notion of an 'African aesthetic style' draw to a certain extent on postmodern and postcolonial strategies, including an awareness of the concepts of hybridity and liminality. I necessarily draw on a wide and divergent range of theoretical sources and, while they might depart from one another in some ways, they largely fall within a poststructuralist and postmodernist paradigm.

I am specifically interested in the way that a study of contemporary jewellery design enables me to trace stylistic frames of representation – as such, I wish to demonstrate how the notion of an 'African aesthetic style' is incorporated into, and played with, in my own jewellery practice. I also acknowledge the way in which such a complex and loaded idea is interpreted in my own work.[5] I am therefore interested in the complex relationship between discourses on a so-called 'African aesthetic style', the way in which the trope of 'Africanness' has been (type)cast, and the products (objects/things) that are created and exhibited as 'evidence' (or as complex renegotiations) of this style.

For the purpose of this thesis, two concepts are highlighted for their importance to my investigation: firstly, the notion of stylistic conventions, and secondly, the idea that such conventions are manifested in particular objects and things. Katie Wales defines 'stylistics' as a way of "looking systematically" at the formal features of a given text/object and determining their functional significance for the interpretation of the material that is under investigation (1989: 438). In addition, Lesley Jeffries and Dan McIntyre state that stylistic conventions can be seen as a "point of confluence" of many disciplines (2010: 3). The notion of 'stylistic conventions' as a site of convergence (as a site of dialogue), so to speak, is important for my own investigation of the characteristics and discourses that frames African cultural objects in terms of an aesthetic style. My aim is not to typecast certain types of jewellery representations of an 'African aesthetic style', neither do I wish to produce a conclusive, generalisable definition of such a style. I rather examine the complex processes of

Central to my analysis is the use of material culture and the renegotiation and interpretation of African cultural objects, in the construction of an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary South African jewellery practices.

[5] Other jewellers' work that also comments on an 'African style', but which will not be discussed in this thesis, include that of Chris de Beer, Beverly Price, Marchand van Tonder, Liz Loubser, Johanna Dahm and Daniel Kruger.

communication and dialogue that pertain to this stylistic convention. The selection of dialogues that I look at in this thesis is possibly an idiosyncratic one, as I chose texts/conversations that reflect important developments in the dialogue on an 'African aesthetic style', but that also influenced my own interpretation and renegotiation of this style. I do not consider all the dialogues that address or speak of an 'African aesthetic style', but only a selected view. To elaborate on the ideas of Jeffries and McIntyre, it is "the relationship between the writer [jeweller] and the text [jewellery], and the reader [viewer] and the text, as well as the wider contexts [discourses] of production and reception of texts" that characterises stylistics (2010: 3).

Also applicable to my investigation is Jean Boase-Beier's notion that the process of translating and interpreting style is central to our understanding of texts.[6] Boase-Beier is interested in the translation of style through "the way the style of the source text is viewed", and how this will have an effect on "the translator's reading of the text" (2006: 1). The recreative process of the interpretation of texts also plays an important role, as the "translator's own style will become part of the target text" (*ibid.*). I find Boase-Beier's explanation of the translation of texts and the translator's analysis of the texts particularly applicable for my own discussion of the way in which an 'African aesthetic style' can be translated into the practices of contemporary jewellery. I am specifically interested in both the producer's (jeweller's) and the viewer's articulation of an 'African aesthetic style'. Both these translators, the producer and the viewer, incorporate their own viewpoints on the interpretation of an 'African aesthetic style' into the analysis of jewellery pieces, largely through discourses and practices that frame the pieces and objects as 'African'. The way in which style is interpreted in terms of its linguistic features, Boase-Beier explains, is evident in the incorporation of elements such as "voice, otherness, foreignization, contextualization and culturally-bound and universal ways of conceptualizing and expressing meaning" (2006: 2). For my study, it is important to consider all these factors that reflect on the translation of texts – and jewellery as dialogic vehicles – to show the relationship between a certain style and its content in its embodiment of meaning.

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[6] Boase-Beier is writing within a linguistic framework, hence his discussion of texts. I argue that the notion of 'text' can also be used in a broader framework, and I therefore discuss certain jewellery practices and products as dialogic in nature, insofar as they use a certain visual language that is communicated through certain materials/products. Throughout my thesis I work with the idea that jewellery has a specific communicative dimension and can therefore also be seen as a text of sorts.

In addition to issues relating to stylistic conventions, this thesis also deals with the discursive and visual manifestation of these styles in particular things, or objects.[7] Things and/or objects are multifaceted and complex in the meanings that they acquire within a certain society; they attain symbolic, political, economic and social meanings, while they also encapsulate memory. Roland Barthes argues in this regard that the symbolic interpretation of objects reveals the ambiguous power of the past and the present. Barthes states that "objects (and other messages) operate as a *sign* when they stand for the whole of which they are an intrinsic part" (cited in Pearce 1992: 27). Barthes thus suggests that objects operate as complex symbols, and as points of convergence for the past and the present. This is an important point that has much bearing in my investigation of contemporary jewellery design practices.

With regards to the human interaction with things/objects, Susan M. Pearce argues that "objects are all-pervasive in human social life, and society as we understand it could not exist without them" (1992: 21). She further explains that objects enjoy a position of "social centrality" because they "are intentional inscriptions on the physical world which embody social meaning" (1992: 21). The relationship between objects and the way they articulate meaning in culture illustrates, according to Pearce, the notion that "social ideas cannot exist without physical content, but physical objects are meaningless without social content. Idea and expression are not two separable parts, but the same social construct" (1992: 21). Things and/or objects contrive meaning and function within the language structures of various cultures, communicating the values and beliefs of a given culture.[8] Conversely, objects can also become de-materialised and un-anchored from the context in which they originally circulated their meaning, particularly through processes of commodification (Cummings 1993: 3). This thesis investigates these complex processes, which have a bearing on African cultural objects and the various discourses that are called to the surface in their production, circulation and interpretation.

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[7] In my study of African cultural objects I find it relevant to refer to objects as 'things'. Bill Brown, author of *The Material Unconscious* (1996) and *A Sense of Things* (2002), refers to an object as a 'thing' insofar as "the word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday… [a thing] holds within it a more audacious ambiguity" (Brown 2001: 4). Brown's reference to an object as a 'thing' reveals a more open-ended approach towards subject-object relationships. As the term 'object' is most commonly used in the sources that I consulted, I also use this term in my thesis. I will, however, specifically use the term 'things' when I want to draw attention to specific subject-object relationships. I am of the opinion that 'Thing theory', as presented by Brown, serves as a suitable framework to examine the dialogue and various conversations and discourses that frame the complexity of African cultural objects, as these objects – as specimens, artefacts, art objects, commodities and everyday objects – are marked by complex, changing relationships of meaning and value within contemporary society.

[8] See, for example, Sally Price (1989) for an investigation of the significance of cultural objects as ritualistic vehicles in certain 'primitive' cultures.

The task of this thesis is to investigate the complex dialogic relationships that are manifested or projected upon certain things and/or objects, specifically jewellery objects that are read or presented as 'African'. As Brown poignantly argues: "the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (Brown 2001: 4).[9] For Brown, this relationship can be taken to the extreme where it becomes necessary to "abandon our image of representation as a projection screen which … separates the 'subject' and the 'thing'" (2001: 8). Don Slater also defines the subject-object relation in terms of "humans and social subjects with needs related to things in the world which might satisfy them (material and symbolic goods, services, experiences)" (1997: 101). According to this perspective, objects are used by a subject to articulate certain social and cultural experiences. As culturally produced and framed, the material world of things reveals a complex subject-object relationship that is central to many forms of social interaction. For the purpose of this thesis I draw on such a definition of 'things' in order to show how a complex dialogic relationship is created and manifested in interpretations of African material culture in contemporary jewellery practices.

The subject-object relation in African material culture was traditionally very strong and significant[10] as objects were produced to fulfil a specific function within African cultures. The utensils, bowls, symbolic *ibeji* figures, snuff containers and pipes that I draw upon in my own work all had a specific purpose within a certain African culture. However, many of these objects have become commodified, and as such, the value that may have been originally embedded within the objects is often ignored, partially forgotten or even rewritten when such objects are represented in Western discourses. I consequently argue that dialogue and

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[9] These stories are, according to Brown, context specific as "the 'perception of things' for an individual from one society, for instance, will be the perception of things 'inhabited' and 'animated'; for an individual from another society things will instead be 'inert instruments, objects of possession'" (2001: 9). Brown describes a *quality* of things as "what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, *fetishes, idols and totems*" (2001: 5, my emphasis). See also Cornelius Castoriadis's *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987) for a discussion of the way in which the relationship between 'things' and individuals stabilises the meaning and understanding of things and/or objects within a society.

[10] When referring to 'traditional' and 'modern' African art objects, I use the term 'traditional' to refer to 'traditional' objects that are part of Western collections that were created during Europe's exploration of the colonised world. These object were housed (often in curiosity cabinets) as 'evidence' – as a Western interpretation of the history of African cultures.

conversations on changing subject-object relationships allow for rethinking the 'thingness'[11] of African material culture.

To develop the theoretical framework for the study I have engaged with the ideas of various theorists and academics who have either written directly (which is not always the case) on the way in which African cultural objects are framed, perceived and enter into dialogue, or whose work, I argue, have a bearing on my discussion of such objects. Of primary importance for my investigation is Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation on the dialogic interchange of language (1981), which I draw on to investigate discourses surrounding African cultural objects. This study is not an exhaustive investigation of Bakhtin's work, but rather a purposive use of his philosophical and theoretical ideas as pertinent to my investigation. In particular, I employ his perspective in a hybrid interpretive framework from which to investigate 'dialogic jewellery' as a contemporary jewellery practice. In the context of my study, I am interested in 'dialogic jewellery'[12] as a platform for investigating and rethinking an 'African aesthetic style', and as example I discuss my own design practice. This thesis, however, only proposes some of the possible ways to interpret and proceed from such a stylistic convention.

In addition to Bakhtin's work, two of the most important sources that I consulted for this study are Susan Vogel's exhibition catalogues *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (1988) and *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (1991). I employ these examples as case studies on the various discourses and display practices that frame African cultural objects in both colonial and contemporary exhibition displays, as well as in commodity culture. I also consulted *Africa Adorned* (1984) by Angela Fischer, a book with numerous photographic images on African cultural production, which proved to be particularly important as a visual reference for my own interpretation of African material culture within my own design practice.

Michael Pickering's book *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001) is of great importance in investigating how both the production and display of African cultural objects and

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[11] One of the main theorists in this field, Bill Brown, describes 'thingness' as an "excess of what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects" (2001: 5).

[12] Jack Cunningham's association with 'narrative jewellery' as jewellery "which tells a story or makes a statement through visual imagery" (2007 [Online]), can also be related to the way that I use 'dialogic jewellery' to portray the dialogue that is consequently established between the producer, the jewellery and the viewer that act as a vehicle by which the work is interpreted and understood.

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art are intricately tied to systems of stereotyping. In the various theoretical sources that I consulted to determine the trajectory of African cultural objects as they are discursively framed within ethnographic and art exhibitions, I found the following comment by cultural critic Stuart Hall in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) particular illuminating: "binary oppositions are crucial for all classification, because one must establish a clear difference between things" in order to facilitate the tasks of organising systems of perceptions and classifications (1997: 236); such oppositions were instrumental in creating both physical and ideological responses to and conversations on the collection and display of African cultural objects.

Shelly Errington's book *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (1998) and Ivan Karp's article "Culture and Representation" (1991) were also important textual sources for understanding African cultural objects as they are situated in Western systems of display. Stephen Greenblatt's article "Resonance of Wonder" (1991) has become essential reading for undertaking a dialogic analysis of essentialised notions of African cultural objects as both art and/or artefact. James Farris's article *"ART/artifact:* On the Museum and Anthropology" also provided valuable insights into Vogel's *ART/artifact* exhibition's mediations, limitations and accomplishments.

I use *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (1991), another exhibition by Susan Vogel, as a case study to illustrate the economic and social features that have a remarkable impact on the manifestation of cultures through relationships between globalisation and processes of commodification. Sidney Kasfir's review of this exhibition by Vogel, "Taste and Distaste: The Canon of New African Art" (1992) was an important source that largely contributed to my arguments on the categorical organisation of African art in the exhibition and catalogue.

Jean Baudrillard's (1998) article "The Theory of Consumption: The Social Logic of Consumption" in his book *The Consumer Society* also provided valuable information regarding consumption and commodification. In particular, Sidney Kasfir's article "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow" (1999) is crucial for my discussion on the role that commodification has played in the development of framing African cultural objects as 'tourist art', which also draws attention to Vogel's condescending approach to tourist art as a category of contemporary African art in *Africa Explores.*

In terms of my own practice, which is situated in a postmodern framework, Linda Hutcheon's article "Postmodernism" (2006) in *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory* provided a key platform from which to engage with contemporary jewellery practices, which I believe draw on certain postmodern discourses. An important concept that Hutcheon (2006: 116) emphasises is the mixing or blurring of boundaries between popular and high art, and between mass and elite culture. Such a process of blurring entails the creation of an in-between space which is, according to Hutcheon, created though the "mixing of levels of culture" (2006: 116).   This space is central to my own design practice, and I especially draw on such a definition when I discuss my own work.

Victor Turner's *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1987), which in turn draws on Arnold van Gennep's model of the liminal, was also insightful for my discussion on the term liminality, especially as it allows me to investigate my own work as a liminal space where the discourses that frame African material culture converge and proceed from. Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides a basis from which to critically engage with issues regarding the notion of hybridity and the ambivalent representation of African material culture within the 'third space'. Mikhail Bakhtin's commentary on hybridity is also crucial to my discussion. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin* (1981) Bakhtin explores hybridisation through dialogic constitutions and their relation to linguistic enactments that emerge from the engagement of viewers (readers) with the 'text'. I draw on Bakhtin's formulation of intentional hybridity, which often intends to disrupt accepted assumptions in the interpretation of culture. I argue that intentional hybridity, through the deliberate synthesis of texts, discourses and interpretations, creates a receptive space for transformations and new readings to transpire.

Of the particular theoretical sources that I have consulted to determine the importance of context and space as interdependent factors in which the text (object) is perceived, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984) provided valuable information on how interdependent and divergent readings are dialogically sustained. The linguistic interaction between different viewers and contexts, which Bakhtin (1981) perceives to be a socially located language, is of cardinal value for my thesis. These theoretical sources enabled me to delineate some forms of the dialogic interchange that frames African cultural objects, especially as such forms of interchange contribute to the 'imagining' of an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery design.

My argument unfolds in the following order: after this introductory chapter, the second chapter of my thesis touch on certain modernist and colonial discourses[13] that have a bearing on the conceptualisation and visualisation of African culture. I illustrate how certain forms of material culture were used to create the stereotype of 'the African' in the European mindset. Stereotypes have long supported Western political and economic systems of domination and control over Africa – as such, I discuss stereotyping as an important and inescapable concept in contemporary cultural analysis. These structures of stereotyping are, however, complex and double-edged, and as Michael Pickering argues, the danger of prejudicial knowledge is "that the 'false' being *too* visible will never guarantee that the 'true' [is] visible enough" (2001: 45, 46).

In this chapter I also examine the dialogic conception and reading of African cultural objects, specifically in terms of the Western categories of 'primitive artefacts' and 'artworks' as models of interpretation. Lize van Robbroeck explains these shifts of migration from the 18th and 19th century as a move from their treatment as objects of curiosity to ethnographic specimens and, finally, as works of art – a process that demonstrates "the successive textual and institutional transformations of the African art object" (2006: 72). By drawing on this analysis, I examine key conversations on such modes of framing traditional African cultural objects within colonial exhibitions, where these objects were represented as evidence of a certain 'African style'[14] – a problematic mode of framing that is still, to some degree, manifested in contemporary jewellery design. As such, I demonstrate that African cultural objects constitute a palimpsest of divergent meanings,[15] particularly in the context of jewellery design where these objects are referenced as 'things' – as places for thinking about and rethinking subject/objects relations.

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[13] Modernist discourse refers to discursive paradigms that derive from the time of the Enlightenment; modernist and colonialist discourses are inextricably linked since, as McEvilly argues, modernity is no more than "a myth of history designed to justify colonialism" (1995: 85). The dualistic relationships implicit in colonialism promoted Western 'superiority' over Africa as an 'inferior' culture. This complex relationship is central to my investigation of African cultural objects.

[14] Such an investigation is aligned with what Carol Duncan identifies as a growing "concern with how Western museums represent other cultures – how museum displays of 'primitive', Third-World, or non-Western art often misrepresent or even invent foreign cultures for what are ultimately political purposes" (1991: 89).

[15] Stuart Hall suggests that "viewing objects as palimpsests of meaning allows one to incorporate a rich and complex social history into the contemporary analysis of the object" (Hall 1997: 167). Although the origin of all these objects is limited to a specific culture and framework, various meanings are given to explain these objects as they are changing and "continually redefined along the way" (Hall 1997: 167). Thus the palimpsest of meanings, according to Hall, provides a "useful metaphor for the process, where new layers are superimposed over old ones, or re-articulated, once the object is placed in a different context" (1997: 167).

Of central concern in this chapter is the dialogic reading of African cultural objects in Susan Vogel's exhibition and catalogue *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (1988). I find Bakhtin's formulation of dialogism relevant in my discussion on the interaction between the manifold views on and perceptions of African material culture, as perceived in different contexts. I further draw on the way in which Bakhtin (1981: 277) conceptualises the interrelationship between the 'word' and the 'object' as a complex act, which is open to dispute and interpretation. I use Bakhtin's formulation on such an exposed and complex relationship, which he applies to the conversation of ideas surrounding the object, to draw on my investigation of Vogel's exhibition *ART/artifact,* in relation to how such interdependent and divergent readings of African cultural objects are dialogically sustained in an open-ended framework/relationship.

In Chapter 3 I offer a discussion on *Africa Explores*, another catalogue by Vogel, which acted as a landmark attempt to remedy the marginalisation and essentialised notions of an 'African aesthetic' in African arts. Following this discussion, I contend that Vogel's attempt in creating new informative categories is a reaction against the largely homogenised perception of African material culture. At the same time this exhibition perpetuates a categorisation of African material culture. It also addresses the way in which African cultural objects and art exist in a continuous and contradictory set of relations within the various categories and contexts in which they are framed and presented. The visual representation of African cultural objects and arts is thus examined in relation to certain contexts and frameworks as their significance and meaning are site-specific and context-bound.

In this chapter my intention is also to ascertain the way in which certain African cultural objects are appropriated into commodity culture and to establish the effect of commodification on contemporary engagements with these objects. John Tomlinson's theorisation of globalisation in *Globalization and Culture* (1999) was insightful for my discussion on the interconnectedness of globalisation and culture. Tomlinson highlights the complex interconnections of culture within a global society. Tomlinson emphasises the role of globalisation on cultural modes of production, and this chapter investigates the effect of globalisation on the appropriation of African material culture and its subsequent commodification. Arjun Appadurai envisions objects as part of a trajectory, shifting in and out of commodity status, since "commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors", and as such objects are therefore not caught in an unalterable, singular state of being commodified (1986: 15). Kasfir

(1992) also emphasises that African cultural production should not be attributed to a solitary category, as African cultural production exists in an extensively broad framework that is influenced by numerous discourses and dialogues. A central facet of this chapter is that African material culture is continuously evolving as it functions in multiple and shifting contexts and conversations. To demonstrate such shifts and conversations, I focus on the development of the tourist art industry, and its impact on prevailing notions of the authenticity of African material culture.

When re-evaluating the status of African cultural objects through the various conversations and discourses that largely frame these objects' meanings in contemporary society, the question that I wish to raise is not whether 'traditional' objects can somehow 'survive' commercialism or avoid being marked by processes of consumerism. This is a relatively old and highly contested debate.[16] Many academics and artists agree that it is difficult and problematic to try and define an 'authentic' African art object. My research is rather orientated towards the question of how African material culture is specifically constructed and responded to in contemporary jewellery practices through complex dialogic interchanges that frame African cultural objects. My intention is to investigate an 'African aesthetic style' in relation to jewellery design, and the way in which African material culture is interpreted, branded and consumed in contemporary visual culture.

While Chapters 2 and 3 serve as the theoretical basis for my analysis, Chapter 4 traces the effect of colonial and commercialist discourses on contemporary South African jewellery design, as well as the 'things' that are created within this discipline, as commentary on the notion of an 'African aesthetic style'. Chapter 4 situates my discussion of such contemporary jewellery practices within the ideological framework of 'liminality', as formulated by Arnold van Gennep. In this regard, I discuss the concept of the 'third space' in the light of Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'hybridity' as an exposure of conflict and tension within the dichotomous structures of colonial discourse.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of hybridity and its relation to the social and dialogic construction of language is also important for my argument. I discuss Bakhtin's interpretation of hybridity as

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[16] See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt (1991), Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner (1999), James Clifford (1988), Thomas McEvilley (1995) and Shelly Errington (1998).

a mixture of languages, and not as a creation or reproduction of a singular social language. His work identifies the linguistic performances of dialogue that transpire between different speakers or users, which is important for my own investigation of the various processes of dialogue that are facilitated by contemporary jewellery design practices, particularly as they narrate divergent (and also conflicting) notions of an 'African aesthetic style'. Chapter 4 provides a dialogic perspective on the effect that numerous discourses, display practices and writings have on the notion of an 'African aesthetic style' as manifested in 'dialogic jewellery'.

I situate my investigation of the manifestation of an 'African aesthetic style' within a contemporary jewellery design framework by discussing my own practical work in relation to discourses on colonialism, commodification, mass production and objectification that are addressed and reflected in my work. In terms of my research, both my theoretical and practical work concerns with how various discourses (such as colonialism and consumerism, for example) are dealt with and visually manifested in jewellery design. As such, my research aims to explore the numerous forms of dialogic interrelationships that surround African cultural and art objects, and their position as 'things' within contemporary conversations on 'dialogic jewellery'.[17]   This thesis is, however, not motivated by the desire to provide a conclusive, comprehensive conversation on African material culture. I rather wish to reveal, on the basis of my own work, how the notion of an 'African aesthetic style' can be integrated into, and renegotiated within, contemporary jewellery practices. For this reason I approach my own work and writing in a necessarily self-reflexive way, and I do not contend that I can somehow avoid the very hegemonic discourses that I am critical of. In much the same way as Africa has been (mis)represented through processes of colonial and consumerist representation, I am also engaged with my own subjective process of (type)casting both in the thesis that I write and the pieces that I produce. Perhaps, such pieces and writing can facilitate a better understanding of the various complex discourses and conversations that comprise their make-up.

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[17] Shulman argues in this regard that "Objects have the ability to serve as living testaments to the liminal spaces of time, culture and personal and social identities" (2004 [Online]). The relationship between the present and the past, and how this constructs meaning, is a distinctive aspect of my research, as my discussion of my own work demonstrates how things/objects (my jewellery pieces, for example) exist in a wide field of conflicting ideas on colonial and post-colonial culture.

CHAPTER 2

THE DIALOGIC RELATIONSHIP OF DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE IN THE PRODUCTION OF AFRICAN ART AND/OR AFRICAN CULTURAL OBJECTS

In this chapter I look at Susan Vogel's exhibition *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* in order to investigate the way in which various processes of dialogue are facilitated by certain colonial and contemporary exhibitions of African material culture, particularly as they narrate divergent (and also conflicting) notions of 'Africanness' as trope (be it in political or cultural discourses, or in the definition of an aesthetic style). In order to determine the effect of dialogic relationships on African cultural objects, as well as the various discourses that are called to the surface in their production, circulation and interpretation, I specifically look at Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the dialogic interrelationship within language in order to investigate how meaning is located within African cultural objects. I explore the complexity surrounding the interrelationship between such objects and various aspects of social dialogue around them as well as the way in which various utterances[18] conceptualise African cultural objects through dialogic interaction. As no inquiry into Bakhtin's theory of dialogue can bypass an investigation of the phenomenon of 'heteroglossia',[19] I will outline this concept as it relates to my own analysis of the diversity of utterances that constitute the dialogue on African material culture.

Bakhtin proposed that dialogic relations constitute a linguistic matrix between several different ideas and voices, and does not constitute a singular social language. His work identifies the linguistic performances of dialogue that transpire between different speakers or users. David Lodge describes Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' as a process of interaction "between speaking subjects, between texts and readers, between texts and themselves" through which meaning is produced (1990: 86). Michael Holquist describes how dialogue is a manifold phenomenon that is composed of "an utterance, a reply and a relation between the two", with the relation being the most significant in the dialogic relationship "for without it the other two would have no meaning" (1990: 38). Accordingly, Zali Gurevitch explains Bakhtin's notion on the plurality of

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[18] Bakhtin's term "utterance", whether it is spoken or written, is the "basic building block in his dialogic conception" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 10). According to Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist an utterance "is always expressed from a point of view", which for Bakhtin is a "process rather than a location ... an activity that enacts differences in values" (1984: 10). The implications of such a definition will become clear as this chapter progresses.

[19] For Bakhtin, heteroglossia is "the mingling of different language groups, cultures, and classes [that guarantees a] perpetual linguistic revolution", and which guards against the hegemony of any "'single language of truth' or 'official language' in a given society, against the ossification and stagnation in thought" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 22).

dialogue as "the fragile moment of the encounter between individuals ... between an individual and society," which can be regarded as the essential link in the "social, the individual and the textual fabric that makes the expansive fields of culture" (2000: 244).

My own theoretical stance in the investigation of African cultural objects incorporates Bakhtin's conception of 'dialogism' as social production and collaborative construction of meaning which derive from the interaction between manifold viewpoints and perspectives on African material culture. The way in which value is shaped through dialogue introduces differences into a new complex relationship rather than a fixed unity, which Bakhtin understands "as the activity of authoring" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 10). Clark and Holquist (*ibid.*) elaborate that "all of us who make utterances", be they textual or verbal, "are thus authors; we operate out of a point of view and shape values into forms." Such dialogic interchange on the subject of African cultural objects is, to some degree, illustrated by Vogel's *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*[20] exhibition, which aimed at tracing the dialogue on such objects as they are manifested in a series of relationships.

In the exhibition *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* Vogel critiques and draws attention to the way in which the visual representations of African cultural objects creates an essentialised and predominantly preconceived idea of Africa that is perpetuated by the display formats of certain exhibitions.[21] The dialogic relations that define the notion of

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[20] *ART/artifact* was an influential exhibition at the Center for Art, New York in 1988, which raised the level of awareness regarding display conventions of both art and anthropological artefacts. According to Anna Jones, this exhibition, which consisted of an installation of African objects, "presented a series of galleries depicting different contexts for displaying African art: 'Contemporary Art Gallery', 'Curiosity Room', 'Natural History Museum Diorama', 'Art Museum', and a videotape of an African ceremony" (1993: 206). The African materials in the exhibition consisted of African objects from the collections of the Buffalo Museum of Science, the Hampton University Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History. In this chapter I will consider only three of these contexts: the 'Curiosity Room', 'Natural History Museum Diorama'and 'Contemporary Art Gallery'.

[21] Africa, as a continent of diverse cultures, has been subject to severe misrepresentation and stereotyping. One of the main reasons for this misrepresentation is the fragmented, inaccurate compilation of images which became the basis of knowledge for the Western world in defining Africa. Stereotypes and generalisations have become part of the Western meta-narrative of Africa. Stereotypical representations of 'Africanness' had a powerful bearing on the divergent inhabitants of Africa through the way in which Africa was visually (re)presented, in particular during the colonial era. Valentin Mudimbe lists natural history and ethnographic museums that gained increasing momentum from the mid-19th century: "1856, Berlin, an ethnographic section is created in the Museum of Antiquities; 1857, Oslo, creation of a museum of ethnography at the University of Oslo; 1866-76 and 1877, organization of the Yale and the Harvard Peabody museums; 1869-74, New York, the American Museum of Natural History; 1878, Paris, Le Trocadéro; 1881, Cambridge, The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology; 1891, Göteborg, Museum of Ethnography; 1893, Chicago, Field Museum of Ethnography; 1897, Terveuren, the Congo Exhibition; 1899, Philadelphia, The University Museum" (1994: 61).

'Africanness' as trope rests on perceptions that have been extensively questioned in a postcolonial setting, particularly those ideologies[22] and visual mechanisms that were used to solidify a certain stereotype of 'Africanness'. Vogel investigates how such perceptions are created and disrupted through dialogue by emphasising the relationship between the specific objects and the way in which display practices, to a certain extent, frame their meaning. In this exhibition the same objects were shown in a recreation of a curiosity room, a natural history museum and an art gallery. Vogel's aim with this multifaceted exhibition was to force the viewer to "question what they were seeing and how the very frame of the exhibit affected it" (Karp & Wilson 1996: 265).

This chapter proceeds by a brief overview of *ART/artifact* and then I specifically focus on three objects/jewellery pieces that feature in this exhibition. I do not aim at giving an extensive analysis of this exhibition, but I rather wish to focus on these three pieces as they form part of a specific dialogic interrelationship between a creator, viewer, object and specific context. This inquiry is undertaken as an investigation into certain display practices by specifically focusing on Vogel's commentary on the *ART/artifact* exhibition. My discussion of these objects in the exhibition *ART/artifact* seeks to represent the multiplicity of voices as they relate to a single exhibition (event)/text.

The different styles of display that were deliberately reconstructed for the exhibition were supposed to reflect "differences in attitude and interpretation", while showing how the viewer is manipulated by such styles of display (Vogel 1991: 198). I unpack and evaluate discursive strategies on discourses on exhibition practices employed by Vogel in this exhibition to illustrate how discourses on African cultural objects are framed and displayed.

2.1: An Introduction to Colonialism as Modernist Discourse

A discussion of colonial and modernist discourses is cardinal in the reading and visualisation of African cultural objects. Graham Pechey defines the interrelatedness between discourses in

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[22] For Jonathan Joseph, ideology is a "form of consciousness, describing a set of ideas or beliefs, or different theories, outlooks and ways of seeing the world" (2006: 14). At the same time, ideology can also have negative connotations insofar as it can describe a "false consciousness [that represents] the way that things appear to us in our day-to-day interactions, but this appearance may not be the whole picture" (*ibid.*). Ania Loomba echoes this sentiment by arguing that colonialism in particular reshaped existing structures through the functioning of ideologies, and these ideologies were central to a simultaneous "misconception of reality and its re-ordering" (1998: 57). Such a view of ideologies is central to my own investigation, and resurfaces throughout this thesis.

dialogism as the process of dialogue which is "installed within the very semantics of discourse, organising the word's meaning" (1989: 47), an idea which I apply to the reading and contextualisation of African objects as framed through certain discourses. For such a reading I thus focus briefly on the way in which modernist[23] and colonial discourses may impact on the exhibition of African material culture.

Colonialism is intricately tied to modernist discourses as such discourses are evident in the very foundations of colonial discourse. Colonialism is closely associated with European voyages of 'discovery' from the time of the Enlightenment,[24] and it was profoundly stimulated by the Western urge to 'know everything'. As a result, the 'unknown' (that is, unknown to the Western colonisers) was explored and mapped so that it could be 'conquered' and 'controlled', whilst imposing Western order upon it.

Colonial discourse is central to the modernist episteme, with one of the most profound effects of this relationship being the emergence of nation states in Africa during the time of colonisation. According to Lize Van Robbroeck, modernity as discourse is "primarily engaged in the constant invention of strategies to create foundations and boundaries where none seem to exist" (2006: 43). The advent of nation states was a typical modernist phenomenon, showing the Western imposition of sovereignty and control over, inter alia, the African continent. For example, European colonisers considered it their 'duty' to 'guide' Africans to political maturity and eventually enable them to gain "political independence" (Pounds 1963: 367). Hence, Africa was divided into European colonies for the West to 'liberate' from barbarism, to possess and to govern, and eventually to be 'set free' in a postcolonial era.

The hierarchical delineation of race is a typical modernist notion and it was sturdily implemented during the colonial period. Johan Blumenbach (1752-1840) was one of the first Europeans to propose that "the different races should be classified according to colour"

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[23] I also investigate the responses to modernist discourses in Chapter 4.1 when I discuss postmodern forms of play in relation to contemporary jewellery practices.

[24] According to Naidis, "the Enlightenment was essentially a rationalist movement of the 18th century born in England and nurtured in France … its economic theory became the secular gospel to the new industrial bourgeoisie" (1972: 299). Followers of this radical cultural shift "thought of the universe as a machine governed by natural laws … [and] taken together, these laws could comprise the science of man … For the Enlightenment thinkers the process of knowing became important as never before … There was still a place for God, but he was outside the epistemological function of the mind. The mind itself was a crucible which took in the raw material of seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting, and hearing to fuse these into ideas" (1972: 300).

(Maxwell 1999: 39), while he also drew direct comparisons between the physical and mental characteristics of different racial categories. Along with schools of thought such as Social Darwinism,[25] these perspectives on race provided justification for the development of an European view of Africa's natural inhabitants as 'backward' and as 'behind' Europeans on a scale of human progress (Hight & Sampson 2002: 2). In Western society, which was largely ridden with an obsession with racial difference at that time, this view was taken up to provide justification for Europe's colonisation of Africa (Naidis 1972: 403). Such hierarchical perspectives on race were perpetuated under the guise of certain discourses that professed of the inviolability of the Western colonial project, most notably through the idea that the West 'burdened' itself with the moral obligation to help the 'noble savages' of Africa to develop themselves and improve their 'primitive' mindsets (Hight & Sampson 2002: 2).

In the eyes of the imperial West, Africa was seen as a terrain of immense mystery and chaos. European society of the time was so infatuated with classification and order[26] that it seems in retrospect as if Europeans would have stopped at nothing to impose man-made 'order' on the so-called 'chaos' that Africa came to represent to them (Landau 1999 [Online]). Such an imposition of order needs constant supervision and control so as to be maintained, and Van Robbroeck refers to this form of imposition of power as the "hallmark of modernity" (2006: 44). In addition, Paul Landau refers to the operation of modernity as entrenched in a system according to which Africa was classified as 'tribal' in order to typecast Africa as the binary opposite of the 'civilised' West. For Landau, "the very notion of tribe was born of the same mode of collection" (1999 [Online]). Modernist and colonialist discourses created and upheld stereotypes to cast the 'primitive' culture of 'the African' in shrill contrast to the West with its preconceived ideas on 'civilization' and 'culture'.

It can be noted in this regard that the divergence and multiplicity of African cultures were often denied in colonial discourses, as colonialism largely ignored cultural diversity and

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[25] Social Darwinism is based upon a misapplication of Darwin's theories. According to Naidis "there were no moral implications in his [Darwin's] theory of natural selection. Under some conditions one organism might survive and another fail, but the surviving organism was not morally better. Yet this confusion arose in certain social and economic attitudes which have become known as Social Darwinism. The central idea was that the struggle for existence between individual human beings can be explained as the survival of the *morally* fittest" (Naidis 1972: 402).

[26] According to Van Robbroeck "the roots of the modernist compulsion to order, classify, name and control, lie in the anxiety accompanying the decline of a divinely structured and meaningful universe. Since order is perceived as no longer divine, but man-made, and thus artificial, it becomes a matter of power, will, force and calculation" (Van Robbroeck 2006: 43).

presented an essentialised, mono-cultural perspective of 'the African'. This essentialism was crucial for the functioning of colonialism and the binary structures it upheld. Van Robbroeck explains that Western viewers of the essentialised and "global oneness" that underlies the diversity of Africa can be ascribed to "the notion of a universal human nature [that] becomes inextricably conflated with modern, bourgeois European values" (2006: 41).

The West's fixed ideas of 'civilization' and 'culture' can be seen in the power relations that were sustained by the dualisms[27] that entrenched modernist discourse. According to Bauman, the dualistic conception of 'nature' and 'culture' is one of the most pervasive and powerful ideas that ensconces modernist discourses. Bauman states that "modern science was born out of the overwhelming ambition to conquer Nature and subordinate it to human needs" (1991: 39). Val Plumwood also suggests that the reason/nature duality (that goes hand in hand with Bauman's dualistic concept of nature and culture) can be seen as one of the most pervasive dualisms. According to Plumwood, the reason/nature dualism places the European ruling class in a position of "dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities" (1993: 44).[28]

The dualistic structures fixed in Enlightenment discourse consequently framed Western culture as a prototype against which the culture of an Other could be measured. Van Robbroeck affirms the importance of the idea and category of 'the Other' in the Western "process of self-exaltation, since without it the West would not have been able to recognise and represent itself as the summit of human history" (2006: 53). Hall also states in his article "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" in *Formations of Modernity* that:

> The figure of 'the Other', banished to the edge of the conceptual world and constructed as the absolute opposite, the negation, of everything which the West stood for, reappeared at the very centre of the discourse of civilization, refinement, modernity and development in the West, 'the Other' was the dark side – forgotten,

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[27] The dualistic structure of Western thought "emerges most strongly in the following sets of contrasting pairs: culture/nature; male/female; mind/body; master/slave; universal/particular; self/other; reason/emotion; civilized/primitive" (Van Robbroeck 2006: 52). These dualisms result from a "certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinate 'Other' … and the identity of both sides of the relationship are shaped by this denied relationship … The inferiorised 'Other' is relegated to the background or isolated in ghettoes in order to deny the dominant sphere's reliance or dependency on it" (*ibid* 2006: 52).

[28] Plumwood regards the reason/nature duality as the "line of fracture between reason and nature ... [and] in the contrast set, virtually everything on the 'superior' side can be represented as forms of reason, and virtually everything on the underside can be represented as forms of nature" (1993: 44).

repressed and denied; the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity (Hall & Gieben 1992: 314).

Colonial and modernist discourses thus played a major role in stereotyping and classifying Africa, its inhabitants and its diverse cultures. According to Anne Maxwell "colonized peoples were exposed to hierarchal systems of classification [and] were portrayed as flouting the taboos associated with civilization" (1999: 2). Such representations on African culture were employed, inter alia, in exhibitionary displays "by replacing the concrete realities of colonialism with imaginary representations based on the dream of absolute control" (Maxwell 1999: 3). Exhibitionary displays and collections on African culture can thus be seen as important vehicles for investigating the manifestation of stereotypes in the representation of African material culture. In the following section I discuss how both colonial and modernist discourses influenced and dominated the visualisation of African culture within certain exhibition practices and discourses.

2.2: Typecasting Africa: Colonial Stereotyping and its Visual Manifestation

> *The idea that before colonialism most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent, and highly integrated has been such a powerful paradigm and so fundamental to the West's understanding of Africa that we are obliged to retain it even when we now know that much of it is an oversimplified fiction* (Kasfir 1999: 90).

Stereotyping has a very close relationship to the way that social groups are constructed, and it has played a powerful role in the representation of the colonial Other. According to Michael Pickering, forms of "under-representation, over-representation and misrepresentation" dominate colonial representations of the Other (2001: xiv). In this section I investigate how such oversimplified fictions, to use Kasfir's idea, were manifested in and perpetuated through specific stereotypes.

For the purpose of this thesis it is important to distinguish between categories and stereotypes. Michael Pickering argues that "thinking in relation to categories is a necessary way of organising the world in our minds, creating mental maps for working out how we view the world and negotiating our ways through it in our everyday social relations and interactions" (2001: 2). Categories are not preset, and they change with our perceptions and understanding

of the world. Stereotypes, on the other hand, carry with them "quite definite ideological views and values, they are not necessarily integral to our perceptual and cognitive organisation of the social world we live in" (Pickering 2001: 3). While categories are open towards change and do not necessarily have hierarchical classification as their main prerogative, Pickering sees stereotypes as forms of classification that aims to entrench a relation of authority and dominance between different categories.

The problematic functioning of stereotypes is, according to Pickering, exemplified in the way that they "resort to one-sided representations in the interests of order, security and dominance, or to allow for a more complex vision, a more open attitude, a more flexible way of thinking" (2001: 3).[29] As a result of often inaccurate and largely essentialist representation, stereotypes are frequently drawn upon to portray social groups as homogenous. Pickering is of the opinion that "social stereotypes exaggerate and homogenise traits held to be characteristic of particular categories and serve as blanket generalisations for all individuals assigned to such categories" (Pickering 2001: 3). Other authors also pick up on this idea: Megan Vaughan, for example, explains that "in colonial Africa group classification was a far more important construction than individuation" (1991: 11) in the West's dealing with Africa and its diverse cultures. In addition, Ania Loomba states that colonial discourse conceptualised Africans as "members of groups and it was these groups, rather than individuals, who were said to possess distinctive psychologies and bodies" (1998: 52).

Walter Lipmann's critical assessment of stereotypes also emphasises their power to form pre-set assumptions that lead to the loss of an individualised understanding of that which is stereotyped (1965: 59). At the same time, Lipmann also considers stereotyping as a "necessary mode of processing information, especially in highly differentiated societies, an inescapable way of creating order out of 'the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality'" (1965: 63). The second part of Lipmann's analysis draws attention to the way that stereotypes are used to make sense of and to understand, and thus to order, the world – all ideas that resonate with the colonial project and its need to comprehend, tame and conquer. Lipmann's assessment of stereotyping also highlights the enduring problems that modernist discourses pose for cultural multiplicity insofar as such discourses aim to delineate, reduce and essentialise complex cultural systems. Within discourses of modernity, Lipmann asserts, a degree of

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[29] Such a line of reasoning seems to imply that one can think of stereotypes as an antithesis of sorts to forms of dialogic interchange, in which language and meaning are more fluid and open to change. This is an idea that I revisit later in this section.

"gullibility" entrenches our employment of cultural stereotypes as we do not always have a clear or nuanced understanding of the different social or historical practices that pervade certain cultures (1965: 60, 63). Our knowledge of the 'unknown' is often based on the pictures and discourses, the cultural stereotypes that we regard (and imagine) as legitimate.

Colonial stereotypes of Africa are severely limited in terms of the divergence of voices that such stereotypes actually give recognition to, or space for expression, and for this very reason such stereotypes have largely been questioned in postcolonial writings.[30] Stereotypes, as framing mechanisms and essentalising discourses, provide key points of entry for critical investigations into the Western reception of African material culture. For this reason, and in line with such postcolonial enquiries, I specifically look at stereotypical representations and categorisations of Africa that were presented in colonial exhibitions of African cultural objects and/or body ornamentation. In addition, I also draw on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism which insists on the unfinalised phenomenon of dialogue as a possible remedy against essentialised perceptions of Africanness.[31] The interpretation and reading of African material culture exists in a dialogic relationship between the viewer and the context in which African cultural objects are viewed, and in the next section I draw on the example of specific exhibition practices to substantiate this notion.

2.3: Collecting Africa: Ethnographic Museums and the Manifestation of an 'African Aesthetic Style'

A Western perception of the Other, as well as the contradiction that underscores the West's simultaneous fear of and desire for Africa,[32] can be seen in the way that the material culture

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[30] To name a few key postcolonial writers considered to have been some of the seminal postcolonial critics: Edward Said (1993), Frantz Fanon (1952) (1967) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1995) and Olu Oguibe (1999).

[31] Zali Gurevitch explains that dialogue for Bakhtin is mostly employed in his insistence on "otherness, heterogeneity and plurality rather than on the 'generalized other' and the social whole" (2000: 244). Gurevitch elaborates that "dialogic plurality defies a finalised completeness of separate worlds of individuals, groups or forms" (*ibid*.) and brings forth an unfinalized dialogue concerning the perpetual relations between individuals' thoughts and that in my opinion, in my context of investigation, might suggest a frame of open-endedness when dealing with conversations on African cultural objects.

[32] For Homi Bhabha, the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, the European and the African, is complex. He describes this relationship as "nuanced and politically ambiguous … chiefly because the contradictory patterns of psychic affect and identification in colonial relations (desire for, as well as fear of, the Other, for example), undermine the argument that the identities of colonizer and colonized exist in fixed and unitary terms" (cited in Moore-Gilbert, Stanton & Maley 1997: 33).

Sarah Nuttall also argues that European colonialism in Africa entrenches a "white look that renders the black person [the African] a source of terror and desire" (2006: 9). For Simon Gikandi, the desire to encounter the

of the Other was displayed in colonial exhibitions. African cultural objects were marked for their stimulation of the desire and fascination of the Western collector, particularly as they were presented in cabinets of curiosity and ethnographic collections. These feelings of desire and inquisitiveness can be ascribed to the way the West imagined and invested the trope of 'Africanness' with associations of the 'primitive', 'exotic' and 'savage'. These associations also function as a language through which Western viewers could mediate their own difference from the Other in terms of their own assumed 'rationality' and 'order'.

Annie Coombes explains how, by collecting and exhibiting the material culture of the Other, the West ultimately cast such African cultural objects as "by-products of colonial power" (cited in Hall 1997: 184). Through the possession and exhibition of certain objects that were collected during the Western exploration of Africa, the West managed to exert control over the meaning of these objects, and, by implication, over the cultures that these objects purportedly represented. Colonial exhibitions were thus central for providing a visual and discursive framework for the Other and they cast the West in a role of dominance by demonstrating the latter's 'possession' of and control over the 'primitive' Other and its material culture. According to Van Robbroeck, the significance of the 'primitive' Other in the conceptualisation of the Western self is of critical importance as:

> The 'primitive' is … indispensable as the fulcrum around which the
> 'civilized' is constructed. The 'primitive' art object exerted fascination as
> the most concrete and material sign of originary 'primitive Otherness' in
> the European imaginary (2006: 70).

According to Stuart Hall, the collection of African objects "was seemingly an idiosyncratic process, even though undeniably already the product of exploration, conquest and colonization" (1997: 190). Within an exhibition context, the display of the material culture of the Other can often be regarded as meta-narrative for pitting the categories of "the colonizer/seer/knower" against the "colonized/seen/known" (Hall 1997: 199). In this way the oppositional relationship that was presented in colonial exhibitions between the West and the Other was based on social power and control – a relationship that "reduced [African] cultures to objects" (Hall 1997: 199).

"Other" in its supposed ugliness and terror was facilitated, inter alia, by presenting it within an exhibitionary realm – an idea that I explore in more depth later in this section.

Hall also argues that the West exerted considerable power through exhibiting what they interpreted as 'African culture', and that the Western collection of 'curiosities' and 'rarities' from African cultures indicates a "particular kind of inquisitiveness: 'curiosity' emerged, momentarily, as a legitimate intellectual pursuit, signifying an open, searching mind" (1997: 158). Such displays had at their centre an ideal to "uncover the hidden knowledge which would permit … [a] complete grasp of the workings of the world in all its dimensions" (1997: 158). This notion of having a "complete grasp of the workings" of the world can be regarded as a meta-narrative that played an important role in the West's imagining of an 'African culture'.

Colonial exhibitions thus played a central role in the conceptualisation of both the African Other as well as the Western Self. In the following section I examine this idea on the basis of modernist and/or colonial discourses that pervaded 16th-century *wunderkammern* and cabinets of curiosity, as well as 19th-century ethnographic collections. I then trace these discourses within contemporary collections of African cultural objects by investigating the role that the Western museum plays in creating an ideological framework for African art and/or artefacts. I specifically look at Susan Vogel's *ART/artifact exhibition: African Art in Anthropology Collections* in order to explore the complexity surrounding such an ideological framework.

2.3.1: Early Modern Collections: *Wunderkammern* and Cabinets of Curiosity

African cultural objects began to enter Europe around the mid-15th century as specimens and souvenirs. These objects were initially displayed in *wunderkammern* and cabinets of curiosity as testimony to the Western discovery and possession of Africa.[33] Victor Buchli is of the opinion that "beyond mere curiosity, these artefacts and their collections served as proof of an event and contact and knowledge of the peoples encountered. Artefact collections essentially were objectifications of authoritative knowledge" (2002: 4). Early methods of display, such as the

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[33] According to Celeste Olalquiaga, *wunderkammern* (also known as 'wonder chambers') became popular in 15th-century Renaissance Europe. Olalquiaga states that "those immense collections of 'rare' objects, where the natural and the artificial – products of 'divine' and human craft, respectively – lived side-by-side [were] objects of amazement" (2005 [Online]). 'Curiosities' and 'exotic objects' were originally displayed in "rooms filled with all types of objects from nature, from antiquity, and from the art world … in elaborately modelled cabinets, full of drawers and shelves" (*Accumulatus: Museum Collection Management Software* 2008 [Online]). Olalquiaga explains that "unlike the Wunderkammern, where the elements of what we now call natural history were mainly objects of puzzlement and awe ... the curiosity cabinets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mark the onset of a desire to grasp and control the mystery which made of nature an enthralling realm. Once Wunderkammern began to lose their allure in the face of, among other things, a colonial expansion that made their treasures far more familiar and available than befits a *bona fide* object of wonder, the curiosity cabinet became the privileged form of exhibiting such goods" (2005 [Online]).

wunderkammern and cabinets of curiosity, were regarded as microcosms of the world (Pearce 1995: 55). Such displays were also part of the early modernist approach to collecting insofar as they visually manifested "[t]he belief in human reason, and its ability to observe, to infer and to understand the workings of the cosmos" (1995: 40).

The collections of objects in *wunderkammern* and cabinets of curiosity were interpreted within Western society at that time as vehicles for expanding human knowledge, which is an idea that was pervasive within modernist discourse. Pearce explains how these collections stand at the heart of modernist knowledge, both as evidence of particular truths and for demonstrating what counts as 'evidence'. As Pearce maintains, such "collections, therefore, do not merely demonstrate knowledge; *they are knowledge*" (1995: 111, my emphasis). These early collections were thus concerned with constructing a purportedly more knowable world, and with 'understanding' and 'possessing' the previously 'unknown' – that is, inter alia, the colonised world.[34] Steiner argues in this regard that the 'exotic objects' that were collected in the colonies were "icons of conquest attesting to unbridled Western power in the age of Discovery" (1994: 108).

In addition, these *wunderkammern* and cabinets of curiosity exhibited a Western history that was predicated upon the act of collecting. Stephen Greenblatt points out that the *wunderkammern* of the Renaissance "were at least as much about possession as display" (1991: 50). The value that the exhibited objects attained "derived not only from what could be seen but from the sense that the shelves and cases were filled with unseen wonders, all the prestigious property of the collector" (Greenblatt 1991: 50). The "prestigious property of the collector" is an apt description of how the West obtained and exerted its influence over the countries that it 'discovered', and how such countries were portrayed via their material culture as evidence of Western power and superiority.

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[34] The collections of African objects were often regarded by Western society as vehicles for laying bare the supposed 'mystery' of the universe. Hall explains that cabinets of curiosity "were collections with encyclopaedic ambition, intended as a miniature version of the universe, containing specimens of every category of things and helping to render visible the totality of the universe, which otherwise would have remain hidden from human eyes" (1997: 158).

Greenblatt further explains that "[t]he cult of wonder originated in close conjunction with a certain type of resonance, a resonance bound up with the evocation not of an absent culture but of the great man's superfluity of rare and precious things" (1991: 50). The value of these rare objects and admiration of them are, according to Greenblatt, not merely ascribed to their aesthetic beauty, but can also be attributed to the

> excessive, the surprising, the literally outlandish, the prodigious. They [the objects] were not necessarily the manifestation of the artistic skill of human makers: technical virtuosity could indeed arouse admiration, but so could nautilus shells, ostrich eggs, uncannily large (or small) bones, stuffed crocodiles, and fossils (1991: 50).

The relationship between African cultural objects and the way in which such objects have been framed in *wunderkammern* and cabinets of curiosities resonates with Pearce's view on the social centrality of objects – of objects being "intentional inscriptions on the physical world which embody social meaning ... [and these] social ideas cannot exist without physical content ... [since] physical objects are meaningless without social content" (1992: 21). In the next section I expand on this idea by investigating the role that ethnographic collections have played in framing the meaning of African material culture in Western society.

2.3.2: Ethnographic Collections

> *A major interest in the art of ethnology is to convey a sense of the whole society, to typify it in some vivid, compelling manner. Like any essential metaphorical procedure, ethnology thus resembles the arts of visual illusion, if one realizes there is no such thing as simple 'realism' and no possible one-to-one correspondence between that which is 'illusioned to' and the perceptual or conceptual apparatus by which illusion is perpetrated (Boon cited in Fabian 1983: 136).*

In the "arts of visual illusion", to use Boon's phrase, the ethnographic museum has played an important role in imagining the idea of 'Africa'. According to Shelly Errington, ethnographic museums allow visitors to experience a "safari in geological space" (1998: 22), where ethnographic objects are captured in a seemingly static framework. In this way African culture is framed as prehistoric (that is, as caught in a time predating Western contact) and as inclined

towards certain essentialised features (such as 'savagery', for example). This section is concerned with how such discourses have impacted in the reception of African material culture.

According to Henrietta Lidchi in her article "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures", ethnographic museums as referred to today are situated in a "discrete discipline and theoretical framework – anthropology – which is itself allied to a research technique – ethnographic fieldwork and the specific ethnographic texts which report on these studies" (1997: 160, 161). The objects that were often displayed in ethnographic museums were, according to Lidchi, described as:

> mostly made or used by those who at one time or another were believed to be 'exotic', 'pre-literate', ' primitive', 'simple', 'savage' or 'vanishing races', and who are now described as, amongst other things, 'aboriginal', 'indigenous', 'first nations', or 'autochthonous': those peoples or nations whose cultural forms were historically constructed with the complex civilizations of other non-European societies. (1997: 161)

Ethnographic museums specifically put certain objects on display to convey supposedly 'objective' information on African culture.   Accordingly, the display practices centred predominantly on the culture which is represented, through the objects that are exhibited. As Shelly Errington maintains, it is a Western fetish with the 'primitive' that is actually demonstrated by these exhibitions (1998: 83).

Cultural objects were used in certain ethnographic exhibitions to represent Africa as a homogenous structure.   Coombes argues in this regard that cultural objects were largely treated as "the primary signifier of a cultural, national and ethnic identity which proclaimed and celebrated its integrity and 'difference'" (1992: 486). The interrogation of this 'difference' is crucial when dealing with African cultural objects, specifically in terms of how collections of African objects were displayed in ethnographic museums. Such displays served as a means to essentialise and also frame the Other in order to maintain a distance (through difference) from the West. As Ivan Karp explains, the focal point of ethnographic exhibitions is their complex identification and portrayal of an Other. The complexity of such displays can be attributed to the fact that they were formed from ideas of class, ethnicity and gender in Western cultures, and also from processes of negation and inversion, as well as the "'other's' images of their own

'others', as they have been recorded and transmitted by explorers, colonials, and other occupants of cultural and imperial frontiers" (1991: 378). For all their complexity, these forms of ethnographic depiction were marked by what Magdalene Odundo identifies as an overarching theme of the Other as "childlike, irrational, instinctive" (1999: 150).

The main organising ethics used to portray and imagine the Other were the "principles of difference and similarity" (Karp 1991: 375). The way in which the Other was conceptualised can be explained by the way they are "represented primarily as different" (Karp 1991: 375). Karp states that the opposite also occurs as "similarity can be used to assert that the people of other cultures are no different in principle than the producer of the image, or that the differences that appear so great are only surface manifestations of underlying similarities" (Karp 1991: 375). When looking at the material cultures of Africa in a Western context, we see that the notion of the Other as 'exotic' and 'primitive' is primarily based on their supposed differences from Western material culture. The essentialised formation of similarities imposed on African cultures, on the other hand, emphasises how such similarities are used and/ or imagined to stress the Other as a homogenous group.

2.3.3: Contemporary Exhibitions and the Reframing of African Art Objects

> *This is not an exhibition about African art or Africa. It is not even entirely about art. ART/artifact is an exhibition about the ways that Western outsiders have regarded African art and material culture over the past century ... An exhibition on how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture – unless we realize that the image of African art we have made place for in our world has been shaped by us as much as by Africans – we may be misled into believing that we see African art for what it is (Vogel cited in Karp & Lavine 1991: 8).*

Susan Vogel's aim with the exhibition *ART/artifact* was to address the way that Western cultural assumptions have shaped and manipulated African art, specifically by looking at its display and presentation. Accordingly, she states that the exhibition sought to show "how much the identification of an object as art depends on its physical setting" (Barker 1999: 155). Vogel's concern with the display of African art in this exhibition discloses the context as the most defining characteristic of the work. She further explains the extent to which "most visitors are unaware of the degree to which their experience of any art in a museum is considered by the way it is installed" (1988: 11).

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A few landmark exhibitions that have dealt with the entry of African art into the gallery space as well as the representation of established essentialisms on 'Africanness', includes *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which indelibly marked current Western perceptions of 'primitive art'. With this exhibition, organised by William Ruben and Kirk Varnedoe, Ruben suggested that "[t]ribal art expresses a collective rather than an individual sentiment" (1984: 36). The purpose of this exhibition was to address what Rubin argued to be an omission in present-day scholarship on tribal art and culture, and also to showcase the interest of modern artists in such tribal artworks (Rubin: 1984: 1). *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Centre George Pompidou in Paris attempted to adopt a postmodern stance regarding exhibition of non-Western art. Laurie Firstenberg describes the most noticeable problems of these two exhibitions as an "essentialising discourse around African art ... based on relationships among Western modernist brands of appropriating non-Western cultural objects as emblems of the 'primitive'" (2003: 38).

Another two influential exhibitions - *Africa Explores* (1991) and *Seven Stories of African Art* (1995) – were presented in response to the marginalisation of African arts within Western society. In the exhibition *Africa Explores,* shown in New York, Susan Vogel framed the African objects and artworks as a series of categories namely: 'traditional art', 'new functional art', 'urban art', 'international art' and 'extinct art' (Vogel 1991: 10-11). By means of proposing new categories and social groupings on the artistic innovations in 20th-century African art, these categories yet again labelled and categorised the complex diversity of Africans as homogenous. Catherine Lampert curated *Seven Stories of African Art* an exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. This exhibition also presented an essentialised view of the display of African art in the West for which exhibitions such as *Africa Explores* were specifically criticised. In addition, the exhibitions *Authentic/Ex- centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2008) and *Africa Remix* (2005) have been criticised for the exhibition of African art according to Western principles. Considering Brian Sewell's (2005 [Online]) criticism on *Africa Remix,* for example, he questions and criticises African artworks' qualification as art according to contemporary Western standards.

Vogel's commentary on the reading and (re)presentation of African cultural objects in *ART/artifact* tries to address the extensive debates that were raised in previous exhibitions on African art. In this exhibition Vogel deconstructs discourses on collection and display of African cultural objects, by drawing attention to complex display practices that frame African cultural

objects in the Western arena. On the basis of the exhibition installation *ART/artifact*, seen in Figure 1, Vogel deconstructs the style of display that was evident in cabinets of curiosity and *wunderkammern*. Vogel specifically recreates a curiosity room found in the Hampton University Museum in 1905, where African material culture was put on display as 'evidence' of certain cultural notions. According to Vogel, the style of presentation of such a curiosity room often suggested that "the African object has no complex meanings" and the method of presentation "implies that everything – sculptured figures, spears, the crocodile, beadwork and other objects – is of equal value and interest" (1991: 198).

Accordingly, James Faris[35] comments on the aesthetic considerations that Vogel took into account regarding the spatial arrangement of this exhibition. He explains that through the natural history setting of exotic objects "cultural products of the Other, appear with no labels, amongst stuffed reptiles, faded photographs, and mineral specimens (cultural products of the West?)" (1988: 776, 777). Vogel's representation of a curiosity room attempts to show the 'typical' characteristics of the display of African cultural objects within such a context. Vogel displayed the objects without the information (subtitles) on the cultural content of the objects and thereby ensured that the collection of objects on display revealed essentialised notions of Africa. This essentialised way of framing the objects as a collection of "equal value and interest", to use Vogel's words, does not promote the objects as aesthetic objects or artworks, and neither is it an attempt to present the ethnographic documentation or functional associations of the objects.

Sally Price notes that the continuum from ethnographic artefact to art object is largely associated in "peoples' minds with a scale of increasing momentary value and a shift from function (broadly defined) to aesthetics as an evolutionary basis" (1989: 84). In terms of the contextualisation of objects in the contexts in which they are displayed, I also discuss the impact of written contextualisation on African cultural objects in *ART/artifact* later in this chapter.

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[35] James Faris, an American anthropologist and epistemologist, was also an associate professor of anthropology at the faculty of the University of Connecticut from1969. In his article *"ART/artifact": On the Museum and Anthropology* he discusses Vogel's *ART/artifact* exhibition's interventions, limitations and successes, and also comments on issues raised by such shows on the display of African cultural objects. However, Faris is critical of the exhibition *ART/artifact* as a whole, as he states that this exhibition "has little to say about how and why African materials exist outside their context and is silent on issues of repatriation" (1988: 777). Faris draws attention to a problem of this exhibition in that it largely perpetrates and perpetuates the problematic discourses on African material culture. He elaborates that the catalogue of *ART/artifact* "treats both imperialist plunder and anthropological rationalism rather as historical matter of fact … while there could perhaps have been somewhat more mention of it here" (*ibid.*).

FIGURE 1: Installation View of *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* at the Center for Art, New York, (1988) (Vogel 1991: 198).

In the same way that curiosity cabinets served as constructed and imagined 'evidence', African cultural objects which were on display in the natural history museums and ethnography museums were often, according to Vogel, "used to illustrate points about African culture" (1991: 199). Vogel interrogates the display of African objects in ethnographic museums, as seen in Figure 2, by drawing attention to how they were displayed as if such objects can provide points of access to a certain culture, and allow the viewer to glean information from their form and display.

FIGURE 2: Installation View of *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* at the Center for Art, New York, (1988). (Vogel 1991: 199).

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As Vogel tries to demonstrate, ethnographic museums have served the function of framing the Other in such a way as to create an essentialised understanding of African material culture. Faris explains that such an essentialised exhibition style firmly inscribes a way of framing the objects as "rigid, silent - actually keeps things quite distant" (1988: 778). Faris comments on how Vogel manipulated the viewer's reading of the objects through "the familiar labels that further situates these objects as artifacts" (1988: 778). Faris further comments on Vogel's critique of the anthropological manner of displaying African objects in ethnographic museums, as this constitutes a rationalist explanation of "what We [curators] argue they [the objects] are about – buried not just in function, in their own cultural authority, but in Our statements on Their function" (*ibid.*).

Vogel's investigation of display practices reveals African material culture as not only entangled in a convoluted ethnographic framework, but also in questions around its position as art and/or artefact. Vogel regards African cultural objects as an ideal vehicle for examining the way in which contemporary museum installations frame objects by representing them in a museum space. According to Vogel, African art in particular is often marked by "distortion", as the objects were produced for different purposes than for being displayed as art in a museum (1991: 192). In relation to Vogel's perception of how art is viewed in Western art museums, Stephen Greenblatt states that the value attributed to African material culture in Western art museums "lies in the uniqueness, authenticity, and visual power of the masterpiece, ideally displayed in such a way as to heighten its charisma, to compel and reward the intensity of the viewer's gaze, to manifest artistic genius" (1991: 51). The way that museums display treasured African objects as works of art "paradoxically intensifies both access and exclusion" (1991: 51).[36] Such conflicting processes are evident in the display of African cultural objects within both art and ethnographic museums. Susan Vogel highlights this idea in her visual commentary on the Western display of African material culture – see for example Figure 3, a view of the installation of *ART/artifact*.

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[36] Greenblatt explains his use of the conflicting terms 'access' and 'exclusion', when describing exhibition and collection practices, by arguing that "museums display works of art in such a way as to imply that no one, not even the nominal owner or donor, can penetrate the zone of light and actually possess the wonderful object. The treasured object exists not principally to be owned but to be viewed. Even the fantasy of possession is no longer central to the museum gaze, or rather it has been inverted, so that the object in its essence seems not to be a possession but rather to be itself the possessor of what is most valuable and enduring" (1991: 52).

FIGURE 3: Installation View of *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* at the Center for Art, New York, (1988). (Vogel 1991: 202).

Figure 3 is an example of how Vogel's commentary encompasses how both ethnographic and art museums have framed the display of traditional African cultural objects. The art museum's approach to these objects and the way of displaying the object intensifies the distancing qualities inherent in this exhibition practice. Vogel explains this approach in terms of how "each piece is isolated to be contemplated as a work of art. The presentation under Plexi-glass suggests that each work is uniquely valuable and must be protected" (1991: 202).

James Faris refers to how Vogel used the space of the art museum to frame the display of African objects according to the now familiar "insect-in-amber" approach (1988: 778). The African cultural objects were displayed on pedestals and are emphasised through special lighting and covered with Plexi-glass. Such methods of display are instrumental in the viewer's reading of the status of the displayed objects. In addition, Faris comments on the use of labels that accompany objects in the context of art museums, which he explains as "common limited functional statements" which are often not accurate as they are compiled through the curator's speculations on the objects (1988: 778). He further elaborates that such labels provide descriptions as "aesthetic glosses" to the objects of what can already be seen by the viewer, and that the viewer has become so familiarised with these techniques of display that "we assume we are being told something" (*ibid*.). The methods of display that are applied by Vogel to the objects in the context of the art museum bear the same associations and interpretations to objects in the curiosity rooms and ethnographic museums. However, Faris critiques the collection of objects that feature in the different spaces (extensively defined) in Vogel's exhibition - the 'Curiosity Room', the 'Natural History Museum Diorama' and the 'Art

Museum'. He explains that no details have given on "the aesthetic choices that brought *these* objects to the museum setting, nor is there ever a statement that enables us to understand how those for whom it functioned could have been held the views they did" (1988: 778). I would argue in this regard that Vogel's concern with the display of African art in *ART/artifact* was to determine the context as the most significant characteristic of defining the work. While there could have been some additional mention of decisions based on the inclusion of objects within certain contexts as outlined in the catalogue, I would argue that such an investigation would require an entirely different exhibition.

As Vogel demonstrates, African cultural objects are framed by ethnographic and aesthetic discourses, which emphasises the multiple and overlapping interpretations of its display in an exhibition and/or museum context. Coombes points to the "ambivalent status" of African cultural objects as "neither art nor ethnography, but simultaneously both" (1994: 223),[37] and this is an idea that resonates in Vogel's investigation in *ART/artifact*. The discourses that define African material culture as artefact or art are highlighted when such cultural objects are placed in the context of the museum. Such objects are entangled in a complex relationship of meaning once they are put on display.

2.4: *ART/artifact* and Dialogues on African Cultural Objects

I this section I wish to elaborate on some of the issues raised in the previous section by focusing on three African objects in the *ART/artifact* exhibition, and discussing these objects in relation to Bakhtin's formulation of dialogue. According to Bakhtin, "no living word relates to an object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme" (1981: 276).[38] Bakhtin also uses dialogue as a means to address the relationship between (inter alia) the "material makeup of a thing and the aesthetic constitution of an artwork [more specifically] between the work as an object and as an aesthetic object" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 200). The significant differences between the reading of an object as functional or aesthetic are situated within a process of dialogue that is not predetermined and absolute. Therefore Bakhtin argues that "discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogise it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new ways to mean" (1981: 345-

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[37] See also Peter Gathercole (1989: 100) for a discussion of curatorial practices and their methods of discursively framing African material culture.

[38] Michael Gardiner is also of the opinion that the meaning of the 'same' word can drastically fluctuate, "depending on the cultural and discursive field within which it is articulated" (1992: 15).

346). In this view of Bakhtin, I discuss the meaning which adheres to African cultural objects as ultimately dependent upon the context within which they find themselves. Bakhtin argues that no languages, words or discourses originate from a singular point of understanding, as for "any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world ... [where each word within this contextual language or discourse] tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (1981: 293).

The discursive reading of the African cultural objects in the *ART/artifact* exhibition shows that meaning is created and sustained dialogically, through linguistic interaction between different viewers and institutions. The captions on the chosen objects that I discuss include three kinds of remarks on the objects that appear in the catalogue (as seen in the keys in the captions that accompany the objects in Figures 4-6).[39] The captions are firstly ('❖') written by Norman Skougstad, who describes the original African use and meaning of the objects; secondly ('❖ ❖') by Michael Gramly (Buffalo Museum of Science), Jeanne Zeidler and Mary Lou Hultgren (Hampton University Museum) and Enid Schildkrout (American Museum of Natural History), who present information on museum collections and thirdly ('❖ ❖ ❖') by Susan Vogel, who discusses the artistic qualities of the objects (Danto [*et al.*] 1988: 40, 112, 160).

The separate interpretations of authors, museum collectors, curators and artists (as seen in the catalogue of *ART/artifact*) can coexist in the dialogue that defines the African cultural objects. *ART/artifact* creates an environment for dialogue which attempts to show the significant conversations on African cultural objects and how the objects are framed and defined from such dialogic perspectives. The separate interpretations on the African objects show the divergence of different readings on the objects. However, the various readings of the objects by the authors do not propose to create a consensus on the meaning of the object, but aim to show how conversation can open up new meanings and readings of things/objects.

In the context of this exhibition catalogue, the information given on African cultural objects by these authors is, firstly, hinged on Western perceptions of such objects, and secondly, it takes place according to structured classificatory systems. The exhibition of African cultural objects along with the author's and/or curator's explanation of the object frames the objects in a restricted and confined dialogue. The various conversations on the objects are brought into a

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[39] The keys in the captions that accompany the images in Figures 4-6 are indicated by ' ❖ '.

defined framework, as Vogel presents only three selective interpretations on the African cultural objects.

The dialogic relations present in *ART/artifact*, more specifically in the reading of the African objects in both the catalogue and the exhibition, will draw on Bakhtin's conception of dialogism and the degree to which a "text depends on the context in which it is perceived" (Clark & Holquist 1984: 209). Susan Vogel notes that *ART/artifact* is largely concerned with Western perceptions of African material productions. The African cultural objects on display and the extent to which particular discourses frame such objects are illustrated in the catalogue through photographic images of the objects along with printed text and captions. I am particularly interested in the relationship that the commentary has on the reading of the objects as art and/or cultural objects.

In the catalogue Norman Skougstad gives documentation on the objects as specimens which form part of the material culture of Africa. Michael Gramly explains that the discipline of anthropology (or ethnography, as he uses the terms interchangeably) originally "grew out of Western Man's need to feel superior to his less fortunate fellows, and to place Western culture on the top rung of the ladder of cultural evolution" (1988: 36). This way of interpreting and framing individual cultures shows how ethnographers realise that artefacts of a particular culture may in the future be regarded as "the sole, tangible evidence of a vanished social institution or way of life" (1988: 33).

Enid Schildkrout explains the powder container[40] in Figure 4 as part of a carefully documented Yellen collection which "can be used to illustrate !Kung life because *we know* how the objects were once part of that life" (Danto [*et al.*].1988: 188), my emphasis). The way in which Schildkrout refers to the !Kung culture, when giving information on the object, underlines the authors' emphasis on their own authority when framing these objects. The way in which African cultural objects are represented in this context highlights colonial and modernist discourses that inform contemporary visualisation of the trope of 'Africanness', as discussed previously, emphasising Western cultures' infatuation with the classification, ordering and possession of Africa.

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[40] Enid Schildkrout explains that "this compact with a powder puff of fur contains *buchu*, an aromatic powder of fragrant herbs used by both men and woman" (Danto [*et al.*].1988: 188).

Powder Container
!Kung, Dobe, W. Ngamiland,
Botswana
Tortoise shell, fur, herb powder.
L. 17 in.
John Yellen, 1971

❖❖ Worn as a necklace by a wom-
an, this compact with a powder
puff of fur contains *buchu*, an aro-
matic powder of fragrant herbs
used by both men and women. A
delight to the anthropologist, the
Yellen collection is carefully docu-
mented and can be used to illus-
trate !Kung life because we know
how the objects were once part of
that life. ❖❖❖ The nomadic !Kung
concentrate their aesthetic expres-
sion in small, transportable, useful
objects made from materials avail-
able in their barren homeland, the
Kalahari Desert. The European
glass beads were purchased from
their sedentary Koisan neighbors.

FIGURE 4: Powder Container (1971). !Kung, Botswana. Tortoise shell, fur, herb powder. John Yellen. American Museum of Natural History (Danto [*et al.*].1988: 188). Photograph by: Jerry Thompson.

Container
Kikuyu, Kenya
Gourd, beads, leather. H. 19 ¾ in.
Senior Chief Koinange, 1929

❖ Usually ascribed to pastoral peo-
ples of East Africa, this type of
container is used to hold milk. ❖❖
"This collection (the Koinange Col-
lection) is of twofold interest. It not
only offers an interesting study of
African art, but also gives an in-
sight into the ethos of a people."
(Dwight Sumner, student from Sier-
ra Leone, 1929.) ❖❖❖ The design
on this East African gourd seems
naive compared to those on
gourds from Central Africa (p. 171).

FIGURE 5: Container (1929). Kikuyu, Kenya. Gourd, beads, leather. Senior Chief Koinange. Hampton University Museum. (Danto [*et al.*]. (1988: 144). Photograph by: Jerry Thompson.

The caption on the container in Figure 5 shows an example of how all three descriptions on the milk container convey a different interpretation, and this might actually present a more open dialogue on the chosen object. Skougstad gives information on the functional and original use of the object within the specific African culture. Jeanne Zeidler and Mary Lou Hultgren present information on this specific object that forms part of the Koinange Collection, currently housed in the Hampton University Museum. Their description of the milk container reveals the way in which the object is treated as a vehicle for information on the specific Kenyan culture, which becomes the most significant characteristic of the object. In comparison to Zeidler's and Hultgren's readings of this object, Vogel's interpretation on the aesthetic qualities and design of the object pay no attention to the functionality of the object and information on the documentation of the specific culture. Thus the object is used by a subject (the author and/or curator) to articulate certain social and cultural experiences, which initially challenge the complex subject-object relationship between the purpose and the aesthetic perception – the form and function of the object.

The analysis of the objects in the *ART/artifact* exhibition conveys not only the functional purpose of the chosen objects, but also engages in interaction with issues around the visual properties of such an object. Faris is of the opinion that the illustrated catalogue with photographic images of African objects "cannot but make the items available to a specific form of Western aesthetics scrutiny" (1988: 775).[41] Interpretations on both the form and function of African culture objects are fundamental to the objects' significance in contemporary exhibitions.

As maintained by Michael Gramly, the different ways of interpreting African cultural objects, more particularly any product of "human workmanship or artifact", can be explained in the light of the fact that these objects are capable of "inspiring a host of ideas whose complexity and number depend in part upon attention [they have] received since [their] creation" (1988: 33). It is therefore all the questions, debates and dialogues around the objects that make them attain their full potential, which in my opinion, resonate with Gramly's definition of objects acting as a "mnemonic device". Figure 6 presents a stool from Kenya as a representation of a specific stool used by an elderly Kamba hunter in this region. The way in which this African

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[41] For further reading on the conventions involved in printed text and the portrayal of ethnographic representations of social and cultural life, see James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.*

object is displayed in partial (and may seemingly be interpreted as biased),[42] shows the extent to which the collector and curator of the objects have control over the manipulation of the object as well the degree to which a Western lens is used to represent the documentation of the African culture that is exhibited.

Stool
Kamba, Kenya
Wood, aluminum. Diam. 10 ¾ in.
R.M. Gramly loan, 1973

◆◆ This elder's stool was collected at Ithula, Kilungu Location, Machakos District, Kenya, in 1973. The identity of its maker cannot be remembered with certainty, although all parties agree that it was carved before the famine of 1895-97. The carving is from one piece of wood; the aluminum edging and repair are later additions. The prowess of Kamba hunters, known far and wide for their skill with bow and arrow, is commemorated in this stool by the bow shaped cut outs on its legs. The seat is well worn from many years of use. A Kamba elder, perhaps on his way to a party at a friend's home or other important business, might carry his stool, suspended from his shoulder by a loop of thick copper chain, hand made by a Kamba smith. ◆◆◆ This stool has features we associate with objects of twentieth century Western design: simple, elegant lines crisply emphasized by white, and a dark, highly polished surface.

FIGURE 6: Stool. Kamba, Kenya. Wood, aluminum. Buffalo Museum of Science. R.M. Gramly Loan. Buffalo Museum of Science (Danto [*et al.*].1988: 96). Photograph by: Jerry Thompson.

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[42] Gramly notes on the various dialogues that constitute the 'mnemonic devices' for African cultural objects that ethnographers who concentrate upon "artifacts owned by a single segment of society are at risk of being accused of bias ... [as they sometimes] single out a few symbols and give them undue attention ... [hereby] a culture, even an entire sub-continent, might be misrepresented" (1988: 36). A case in point is the African stool. According to Gramly, most books about African art and anthropology show only the stools that once belonged to the elite (chiefs and kings) and ownership was the prerogative of elders and not of the commoners (who used stools in households that even children could sit upon).

Vogel, on the other hand, describes the stool in terms of its resemblance to the typical artistic features that can be associated "with objects of twentieth-century Western design: simple, elegant lines crisply emphasized by white, and a dark, highly polished surface" (Danto [*et al.*].1988: 96). Gramly adds to this that "the justification for collecting and exhibiting only seats of the elite is based on their beautiful workmanship and high level of artistry" (1988: 36). Faris comments on Vogel's exhibition of African objects in the art museum context that "this is certainly the customary way in which the African objects are seen today and represents a dual failure – an attempt to embrace a form of (phony) legitimacy (the anthropological information) while disguising an impotent aesthetic commentary whose only purpose is to sanction the piece as commodity" (1988: 778). The interpretations of this stool by the authors show how dialogues are slanted towards certain subjective ideas and interpretations, not necessarily emphasising the one as 'right' and the other as 'wrong'.

The dialogic understanding of African cultural objects can be articulated through both the catalogue (indicating various voices and understandings of the objects) between the authors as well as between the authors and the context within which the objects are framed. The multiple approaches to the three objects[43] discussed in the exhibition *ART/artifact* shows the effect of various utterances in the dialogue on African material culture.

In Bakhtin's terms,

> Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word "response" here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account (cited in Macovski 1997: 10).

The manifold readings and understandings of African cultural objects transform the objects into an event (a dialogue). African material culture exists in a complex reality, as an intricate texture (of various discourses, cultural codes and systems of representations of ideologies).

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[43] A remarkable feature of the three objects that I discussed above is the fact that all three can be worn as body ornamentation (necklaces). This perception will form part of my own interpretation of the objects that will be examined in my practical work.

2.5: Conclusion

These shifts in the display of African cultural objects, from cabinets of curiosity, to ethnographic museums, and finally the art museum, reaffirm Arjun Appadurai's statement that objects have no meaning aside from those attributed to them. Appadurai states that, in order to understand the meaning attributed to objects, we "have to follow the things themselves, for their meaning is inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their paths. It is only through analysis of these paths that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things ... it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (1986: 5).

The reading of African material culture in various Western contexts of display is reflected and interrogated in the exhibition *ART/artefact*. The museum visitor, as assumed by Vogel, does not see a "material [object] that 'speaks for itself' but material [objects] filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time" (1991: 201). In my opinion and in the context of my investigation, Vogel's interpretation on the various discourses that are dialogically interrelated to the reading of African cultural objects endorses what Bakhtin asserts, namely that in dialogue "no utterance stands absolutely alone, that every utterance must be understood in relation to that which provoked it, and shapes itself in anticipation of a future response" (Lodge 1990: 86).

The display of African cultural objects, particularly in a Western art canon, becomes a catalyst for debate regarding interpretations of African material culture. More recent discussions on the perceptions and representation of African cultural objects draw on theorisations of globalisation and the commodification of African material culture. The impact of globalisation on African cultural objects forms the core of my next chapter, in which I investigate the extent to which forms of dialogue engage in commodity culture and how it has played a part in the discursive framing of African cultural objects. According to Macovski, dialogic discourse "has not only recontextualized ... critical forms, but diversified them as well – giving rise not only to new approaches but to an essentially new genre of critical engagement" (1997: 12), an idea which I find relevant to my investigation of African cultural objects. In the following chapter I extend these ideas by tracing the impact of discourses on African material culture within the context of commodification through an investigation of the development of what was considered to be tourist art and the role that commodification played.

CHAPTER 3

THE DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF AFRICAN MATERIAL CULTURE IN COMMODITY CULTURE

In the previous chapter I explored certain exhibition discourses and methods of display that played a significant role in framing African cultural objects in Western society. In this chapter I investigate another way in which African cultural objects are framed within social, historical and economic contexts. I look at another of Susan Vogel's exhibitions, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art,* to focus on the way that Vogel categorised and framed African cultural objects. These objects were exhibited in five distinct groups, namely: 'traditional art', 'new functional art', 'urban art', 'international art' and 'extinct art'. These categories can, to a certain degree, be seen as a disruption of the presumed notions of an essentialised African aesthetic. Yet these 'new' categories that are proposed by Vogel set their own prescriptions for dialogue and are still categories that perpetuate a categorisation of African material culture. This chapter deals with some of the issues and debates that were raised in this exhibition, particularly with regards to the relation between African cultural objects and processes of commodification.

My aim with the investigation of this exhibition is centred on Vogel's approach to establishing a new framework for looking at the multiplicity and diversity of 20th-century African art forms, which forms part of African material culture. I find Bakhtin's definition of dialogism on the basis of social and cultural exchange[44] suitable for my exploration of how the conversations on African cultural objects are reflected in their display and writings on them, and more specifically how such objects are categorised, framed and interpreted. Bakhtin's conception of culture is characterised by the desire to comprehend and it also encourages an exploration of discourses and ideologies through dialogue. I investigate the dialogic interchange that underscores the framing of African cultural objects, as these objects do not occupy a single discursive field, but several. I am specifically interested in the contradictory Western understanding that constitutes African cultural objects by specifically focusing on the way in which these objects are perceived within the various categories and contexts in which they are framed and presented. Vogel explains how the African material cultural production that is presented in the catalogue of *Africa Explores* reflects an extremely expansive range of styles and media. The artists of the works have also assimilated imported materials, objects and

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[44] According to Bakhtin's (1985: 217) definition of dialogism, every human processes the capacity to "resist, confront and make personal meaning out of social exchange". As such, Bakhtin is of the opinion that emphasis is placed on individual persons "at play [both] within and between cultural groups" (*ibid*.). On this basis of dialogism, I use this chapter to highlight the potential for dialogue, in order to show the contest of voices in the understanding of contemporary African art, which I regard in this chapter as a form of African material culture.

ideas in selective and expressive ways as a reaction to the changes, contacts and upheavals that have characterised essentialised notions of African material culture.

A number of exhibitions have so far addressed matters of aesthetics, interpretations, collecting and observing related to the relationship between the artwork, the artist and the viewer; examples are *Perspectives, African Aesthetics, Close-Up* and *ART/artifact*. Vogel (1991: 2) presents the exhibition *Africa Explores* as "the first exploration of a new field", which I investigate in this chapter with the purpose to emphasise and advance the critical discussions and debates on essentialised notions of African material culture. I explore such debates on the divergence of competing voices in the contest of meaning, which is largely narrated through the domination of Western perspectives. In this chapter I firstly consider how Vogel expanded the scope of inquiry and debates through the terminology of the categories that she established in this exhibition. My aim is not to seek a consensus as a necessary outcome on what constitutes African material culture in the 20th century, but to rather investigate the opinions and expressions of voices (albeit it a very limited kind of dialogue) in the discussion that surrounds these debates. By drawing on Bakhtin's formulation of dialogism, I lay down a framework that is not predetermined, but open to investigation.

Secondly, I consider how African cultural objects in Western society are largely considered as a form of art produced in the constraining conditions of colonial and postcolonial encounters. I use Susan Vogel's exhibition *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* in order to illustrate how this exhibition is utilised to challenge certain widely held misconceptions about 20th-century Africa. Vogel aims to destabilise notions that "its [20th-century Africa] celebrated traditional art belongs to cultures glorious but extinct, dead upon contact with the West; and that there is no modern Africa or African art, merely second-hand Western culture" (1991: 3). In the basis of Vogel's exhibition, I investigate how forms of dialogue affect and frame the relationship between the producer and consumer of African cultural objects. Other significant factors that surface in this relationship that I investigate include processes of commodification[45] that have a tremendous bearing on the discursive framing of African cultural objects, more specifically the exchange, value and use of these objects. It is largely through processes of global capitalism

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[45] The term 'commodification' is a distinguishing feature of capitalist establishments, specifically in terms of the exchange of goods to be sold in markets, as opposed to their direct use by the producer. In terms of Marxist theory, Marshall defines commodification as the "conversion of use-values into exchange-values and heralds a change in production relations" (*A Dictionary of Sociology* 1998: Sv 'commodification'). Annabelle Mooney and Betsy Evans (2007: 32, 56) explain that processes of commodification have extended to that of culture and are most apparent in tourism, which is a pivotal perspective on specifically African cultural production in the "quest for authenticity" that will be addressed later in this chapter.

that African cultural objects become commodified, and this has in turn led to much debate about the meaning and value of such objects within the tourist art industry. The phenomenon of the tourist art industry is affected by a broader discursive framework, which Christopher Steiner argues to entail discourses of "cultural truths and authenticities typically forced in the nexus of production and consumption in mass cultural and economic markets, [which are] characterised by stylistic hybridity" (1999: 9, 103). Within my analysis of Vogel's exhibition, I focus on her creation of the 'urban art' category (which she also labels as the 'popular art' category), and her dismissal of 'tourist art' as a legitimate category for framing African cultural objects. I also look at the position of tourist art as a contested terrain which conflicts with widespread notions of 'authenticity'.

3.1: *Africa Explores* and the Categorisation of African Material Culture in Terms of Art

In this section my discussion on the discursive framing of African material culture in commodity culture draws on Vogel's categorisation of such objects in her exhibition and catalogue for *Africa Explores*. I will refer to the specific categories in which Vogel situated and framed African art as a form of African material culture in order to describe the various readings that African art can acquire within a context of Western exhibitions. The dialogic relationship in which African material culture, in terms of the artworks in the exhibition *African Explores*, is engaged will be fleshed out through unfolding the chain of utterances that occurs in the exhibition catalogue for *Africa Explores*. I look at the categories in which Vogel framed certain African cultural objects as artworks: as 'traditional art', 'new functional art', 'urban art', 'international art' and 'extinct art'.

Vogel's aim in *Africa Explores* is to establish the continuing manifestation of traditional art and its ability to transform and absorb new ideas and concepts. Vogel's intention with the catalogue is to show that traditional African art was never fixed and that African art, as a form of African material culture, coexisted with a modern culture that is uniquely African, and did not perish on contact with the West. Vogel states that her purpose with this exhibition was to try to understand "Africa's experience of this century from the African perspective – from a point of view in which Western things and ideas are particles in a matrix of pre-existing African styles and philosophies ... [instead of attending primarily to] Western ideologies and objects" (1991: 9-10). According to Vogel, *Africa Explores* is seen as a response to *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), which emphasises the importance of employing "contemporary African art in the context of African art, history and culture - if only by failing to do so" (1991: 12). I

therefore consider the contest of meaning over African material culture that is largely narrated and criticised through the dominance of the voice of the West.

In the foreword of the exhibition catalogue *Africa Explores* Vogel acknowledges the five strains in which the artworks are categorised according to their form and content. She notes, however, that not only do the strains themselves "converge and overlap at times, [but also that the] individual artists occasionally move from one to the other" (1991: 10). The strains can thus be characterised by clusters of particular qualities and traits that are constantly (re)evaluated. Vogel states that differences and similarities in African art and material culture cannot be defined though a single criterion such as the artwork or artist's relation to the market (1991: 10). In a review of Vogel's exhibition, namely "Taste and Distaste: The Canon of New African Art" Sidney Kasfir critiques Vogel's categorisation of African material culture, as she readily admits that the categories are in flux and minimally bounded. Kasfir describes her critique of Vogel's approach to this exhibition as a controverting attempt at "bounding the unbounded" (1992: 55).

Kasfir's objection to the categorical organisation of the exhibition and catalogue is that "many of the larger correspondences existing across categories are thereby lost" (1992: 55). As emphasised by Kasfir, African cultural objects should not be ascribed to a singular space or category, as the dialogue in which the objects engage corresponds with a far broader spectrum of discourses. Kasfir describes the mobility of such categories by emphasising how these categories tend to overlap. Kasfir states that "'international' artist are also 'urban', and they don't fail to notice the complex visual environment that this provides all around them ... Despite a mutual distrust borne out of different ideologies, training, and clientele, each is keenly aware of the existence of the other" (1992: 56). Kasfir further explains that both 'traditional' and 'new functional' art are "village based, and made by artists who work mainly for their own ethnic group ... except that [in new functional art] its forms are new" (*ibid*.). The overlapping of these categories not only strictly confines the objects in their organisation and representation, but also evokes questions regarding their supposed authenticity, the Western consumption of these objects, as well as the intention of the artists.

It is important to embark on a cohesive and integrated approach when investigating African material production, as no single discipline or discourse can effectively encompass the numerous manifestations, dimensions and influences on African cultural production. John

Tomlinson (1999) highlights the complex and multifaceted connections and associations of culture within a global society. Economic, political and social features have a remarkable influence on the manifestation of cultures through the relationship between globalisation and processes of commodification. Likewise, Paul Hopper is of the opinion that the most remarkable feature of globalising processes on cultures is that these processes "do not stand outside of culture or cultures, but are shaped by them, amongst other influences"; moreover cultures will "not be immune to the processes of globalization and are, in fact, at least in part, constituted by them" (2007: 2). Tomlinson hereby defines how cultures are affected through the impact of globalisation[46] in several dimensions of the social life of cultures. Accordingly, Tomlinson states:

> [C]ulture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation ... [This] allows us to make some useful distinctions. Very broadly, if we are talking about the economic we are concerned with practices by which humans produce, exchange and consume material goods; if we are discussing the political we mean practices by which power is concentrated, distributed and deployed in societies; and if we are talking culture, we mean the ways in which people make their lives, individually and collectively, meaningful by communicating with each other (1999: 18, 20).

Tomlinson underscores the complex connectivity of individual identity and its global, homogenised integration in society. He states his concern with "how globalization alters the context of meaning construction: how it affects people's sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, how it impacts on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life" (Tomlinson 1999: 20). The extent to which globalisation influence cultures and their material products, in the view of Tomlinson's formulation on the 'context of meaning construction'; Holquist and Liapunov likewise explains that in their opinion "what is consummated or formed into an integral whole is not the material (words), but the comprehensively lived and experienced

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[46] The term 'globalisation' refers to the process by which "culture is said to be the result of the rise of mass tourism, increased migration of people between societies, the commercialization of cultural products and the global spread of an ideology of consumerism, which have the effect of replacing or supplementing more localized cultures" (*Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* 2006: Sv 'globalisation'). One dominant critique of globalisation is that it has homogenised cultures and fashions, with people in the 'developed' Western world sharing great similarities in their needs and perception of the modern world, while many localised cultures are "threatened" in terms of "continuity and authenticity" (*ibid*). There are, however, also critiques of such a homogenised and pessimistic perspective on globalisation, which Paul Hopper explains as an inevitable formation that "shape[s] the nature of [cultures] and their interaction with the different aspects of globalisation" (2007: 3).

makeup of being" (1990: 190). Globalisation comprises of not only the integration of global establishments within cultures, but also the integration of individual identity into the complex connectivity of culture.

By drawing on the extensive interpretation on the interconnectedness of globalisation and culture; in *Africa Explores* Vogel's employment of categories (such as 'international art', 'new functional art' and 'popular art') might be seen as the most evident examples of underscoring the interrelationship between globalisation and how the multiple forms thereof are engaged with and played out in African cultural production and art. The flexibility in traditional art, according to Vogel is apparent in a way that traditional African art today "sheds new light on traditional artists of the past" (1991: 54). The category in the exhibition, 'traditional art' shows a selection of "artistic forms and ideas from the multitude available to them, and have changed their artistic repertoire" (*ibid*). Figure 7 shows an example of an *Ode-lay costume*, reflecting how artists, largely through processes of globalisation, are exposed to new materials, ideas, scale and compositions in their work. Vogel elaborates on the *Ode-lay costume,* by stating that the artist is "(s)eeking to produce the effect of dazzling luxury and complexity…and has combined the assortment of bright, shiny imported materials: Christmas ornaments, fake pearls, upholstery fringe, feather boas, tinsel, plastic flowers, mirrors, and various showy fabrics. The pearl face-screen derives from the bead veils of Yoruba Egungun masks" (1991: 23). Such artworks that form part of African material culture, exemplifies late-20th-century artworks as "heterogeneous in manufacture and in effect" (Vogel 1991: 23). Vogel explains such works as "loud, surprising, exciting, disturbing, active. Colors are strong, with high contrasts. The work is not without complexity or nuance, but its subtlety is not of the old, classically restrained kind" (*ibid*).

Figure 7: Ode-lay Costume by the Sierra Leonian artist Ajani, Freetown (1979). (Vogel 1991: 22).
Photo: Hans Schaal

An important factor that Vogel highlights in 20th-century African art today; is how the meaning of such artworks is largely framed through the audience. The audience, together with the spatial contexts[47] in which the works is viewed, are perceived as diverse and interpretive vehicles for carrying meaning of the works. Accordingly, Vogel states that "meanings are no longer embedded in the materials of the works themselves, or in coded familiar systems known to the intended audience; they are often newly invented, and must be explained. Messages may be ambiguous, personal, and situational, less universal than before" (1991: 21).

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[47] See Arjun Appadurai's article *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* (1990) regarding notions of mobility which describes the heterogeneous nature of how cultures are affected through various contexts of space in the contemporary period. He identifies five dimensions of cultural flows in the form of *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes* and *ideoscapes*. These five formations, I would argue, provide spaces for the construction of new readings through different dialogues that draws on the framing and presentation of cultures and cultural production.

3.2: An Analysis of Contemporary African Art in *Africa Explores*

In this section I conduct my analysis on how the exhibition *Africa Explores* dealt with the reception of contemporary African art within Western society. For Vogel, *Africa Explores* seeks to focus on African art and its artists in "their own context and in their own voices", which locate "Western perceptions of Africa, and Western uses of African art [as] entirely secondary" (1991: 9). Olu Oguibe (1993: 16), in his review on Vogel's exhibition, is critical of Vogel's use of "within their own voices", as this statement proclaims to offer an open dialogue for the voices of African artists. Yet, Oguibe states that "the artists' voice are, after all, not theirs", which claims to be another example of the West speaking for Africa (*ibid*).[48] A Western understanding of exclusively traditional arts produced in Africa is indicative of an essentialised African aesthetic – a misconception of 20th-century African art, which is a problematic and critical topic that Vogel addresses. This misconception is indicative of the view that "there is no modern Africa or African art" (Firstenberg 2003: 37). These notions, according to Lauri Firstenberg, can also be seen in the reception of work currently called "contemporary African art" (2003: 37).

In contradiction to such an essentialised reading of African material culture, in this section I look at how Vogel attempted to frame the visual material in *Africa Explores* by way of categories. Firstenberg is also critical of these categories as they disrupt presumed notions on African art. He states that Vogel's categories are "glossing the evolution of indigenous practices, the co-option of Western material culture by Africans, the contemporary adoption of traditional forms, and the assimilation of Western concepts and mediums" (Firstenberg 2003: 38).

For my investigation on the multiple conversations and discourses that are reflected in the (re)presentation of African cultural objects, it is crucial to question relevant aspects such as the market and social artistic influences in order to attend to the multivalent cultural stance of curator, consumer, artist and spectator, which evokes further inquiry on the dialogue that pertains to the exhibition and the discourses that frame the selections and presentation of African material culture in *Africa Explores*.

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[48] The selection of the works for the exhibition was mainly done by Susan Vogel; they were selected from existing Western collections. The essays in the catalogue were also written by Western contributors.

3.2.1: Assimilations of Western Concepts in Contemporary African Art

The artworks in *Africa Explores* can be viewed in the light of Vogel's aim to address the debates and controversies around the integration of Western conceptions and mediums within a specifically contemporary analysis of African art, which is exactly what the exhibition's subtitle, *20th Century African Art* promises. Vogel included self-taught artists as well as Western-educated artists in the exhibition in an attempt at finding the middle ground between 'traditional' and 'modern' African art.

Vogel comments on the inclusion of foreign elements in the work of the African artists, which is then supposedly regarded by Western society as 'Westernised' and contentious because it suggests implications of inauthenticity. Vogel is of the opinion that this kind of cultural contact is not only unavoidable, but also that "[a]rtists using foreign themes and techniques in their work do so not as a sign of their domination by the West, or their repudiation of their African heritage, but in terms of their own culture" (Vogel 1991: 28). Vogel's intention with her study is to demonstrate that "[l]ike primitivizing European artists, African artists borrow foreign elements that answer their own needs, and they may have little relationship to events and ideas in the West itself"; furthermore, "non-Western peoples" have the ability "to apprehend, digest, and appropriate part of Western culture without losing themselves" (1991: 29, 30). What Vogel tries to emphasise here is that African artists who integrate Western elements (mediums and ideas) into their work are accused of imitating being Western, as such work supposedly only corresponds to African fantasies and imaginary notions of Western culture and not to a Western understanding of itself.

Vogel states that:

> For too long we have regarded this process from a strictly Western point of view, and have been unwilling to surrender ownership of our material culture after it has been permanently borrowed by others ... The widespread assumption that to be modern is to be Western insidiously denies the authenticity of contemporary African cultural expression by regarding them a priori as imitations of the West (Vogel 1991: 30).

Accordingly, Vogel explains that the aim of this catalogue and exhibition is contradictory to assumptions on Western dominance in the dialogue that defines the African objects. Vogel states that African assimilations of imported objects and materials are "selective and

meaningful; that they are interpretations grounded in pre-existing African cultural forms, and that they contribute to a continuous renovation of culture" (1991: 30). An example that shows the integration of mediums and ideas in African cultural production is seen in Figures 8-10, which form part of the 'traditional art' category in *Africa Explores.* These figures supposedly show how 20th-century traditional art still serves its 'traditional' function, although it masquerades in a new form and entirely different medium. These figure dolls represented and honoured deceased twins in the religious systems of the Yoruba in Nigeria. The figures were, according to Vogel, traditionally carved out of wood, but have been occasionally replaced with local factory-made moulded plastic dolls (1991: 44, 45). Figure 11 shows an example from the catalogue of how a school teacher who lost one of her twins carries a plastic doll instead.

Figure 8 : Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria), Ere Ibeji Twin-Cult Figures (Early 20th Century). Wood, coconut shells, string, fabric, leather, and pigment. Collection: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, from the Barbara Jean Jacoby Collection (Vogel 1991: 88).

Figure 9: Unknown Yoruba artist (Nigeria). Ere Ibeji Twin-Cult Figures (Early 20th Century). Wood, beads, cowrie shells, and cloth. The Mnuchin Foundation (Vogel 1991: 89).

Figure 10: Unknown Factory (Nigeria). Ere Ibeji Twin-Cult Figures (Mid-20th Century). Moulded plastic and metal. Collection: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA (Vogel 1991: 89).

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Figure 11: School teacher. Photo: Marilyn Houlberg, 1970. (Vogel 1991: 46).

Marilyn Houlberg explains how the commodification of these twin-cult figures is evident in markets throughout Yoruba. The plastic dolls are manufactured, according to Houlberg, in many different colours in Nigeria and are "readily available" in the markets (1973: 26). Vogel states that these particular dolls in their "new art forms [are] invented to fit old functions … in a process that duplicates the genesis of earlier traditional arts" (1991: 43). While these ibeji figure dolls might appear to be new, such objects still conform to the traditional significance, practices and beliefs of the culture. Vogel describes this as a perfect example of how 20th-century traditional art brings "a new form to an old function" (1991: 44).

This assimilation and overlapping of forms, mediums and ideas can, in my opinion, be attributed to the processes of hybridisation.[49] Arif Dirlik describes the multifaceted interpretation of cultures, as a "statement of mixture", where the significance of the

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[49] I will revisit the concept of hybridity in Chapter 4, where I discuss the notion and its relevance to contemporary jewellery design.

characteristics that are being mixed and re-evaluated are not established in themselves. Susan Vogel proffers certain examples (as seen in Figures 8-10) as indicative of the overlapping and interconnecting of characteristics, styles and mediums in African material culture. Such representations of African art as a form of African material culture can purportedly provoke critique regarding the dominance of a Western reading that largely perpetuates an essentialised African aesthetic. Vogel mentions with regards to such an 'African aesthetic style' in the catalogue that the "continuities and discontinuities in the many different strains of 20th-century African art are enormously complex and still being shaped" (1991: 8). Vogel is of the opinion that the continuities in 20th-century African art are hard to trace, as they turn out to lie "in an African sensibility that is more philosophical and aesthetic than immediately obvious in visual styles" (1991: 8). Vogel's intention with this exhibition is mostly evident in the representation of 'Africa' as continuously evolving in complex social and cultural spaces, operating from multiple and shifting contexts and conversations.

Vogel's attempt can be regarded as a way through which she informed the presumably 'prejudiced' viewer on additional categories such as popular art and international art which exists in a contemporary and global society. In effect these categories disrupt and unsettle an essentialised notion of Africa. This exhibition can in a way encourage viewers to do away with stereotypical presumptions, perceptions and misconceptions of Africa derived from its material cultural production. Yet the exhibition also perpetuates a homogenous categorisation of Africa. Globalisation and commodification have influenced the appearance of and demand for African art, and this is particularly relevant to the phenomenon of tourist art. My discussion of tourist art in the following section highlights the numerous (often conflicting) readings that frame African cultural objects and art.[50]

3.3: African Tourist Art, Commercialism and the Dispute of Authenticity

At the turn of [the 20th] century, it was self-evident that primitive objects were 'idols' fit only to be burned by missionaries or to teach would-be colonialists about the territories

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[50] In comparison to the categories that Vogel used to frame African art in the exhibition *Africa Explores*, Valentin Mudimbe's *The Idea of Africa* (1994), offers an interesting perspective on the subjective categorisation and reading of African material production. Mudimbe points out that there are only three trends (not to be labelled in categories) in contemporary African art. His distinction is worth highlighting as representing yet another competing voice in the debate in which Western perceptions dominate regarding the categorisation of African material culture. The divergence of competing voices shows that categorisations differ and are highly subjective, as meaning is contested.

they would enter; within twenty years it became equally clear that primitive statues were
beautiful objects, suitable for collectors (Torgovnick 1990: 13).

In this section, I investigate another development that was fundamental for framing African cultural objects, namely the development of what was considered to be tourist art and the role that commodification played. In my discussion of this category I specifically use the exhibition *Africa Explores* as an example in order to investigate tourist art as a contested and complex category. The all-inclusive subtitle of this exhibition, *20th Century African Art,* conversely contradicts its purpose of presenting a comprehensive assessment of contemporary African art. In a review on *Africa Explores* Van Robbroeck considers African tourist art as the predominant cultural phenomenon (1994: 66) reflecting the culturally mixed art scene within the parameters of South Africa. Van Robbroeck (1994) claims in her review of the catalogue,

> The most prolific art being produced at the time [20th century] are curios for the tourist market, yet it is scarcely mentioned in *Africa Explores*. Curio art, by virtue of its sheer prolificity and its Western target of consumption, is not collectable, not 'authentic', and lacking, in Vogel's words, 'sincerity' (cited in Mauchan 2009: 26).

In considering the commodification of African objects, the differences and similarities to tourist art are intricately tied to discourses of power and the construction and manifestation of Western hegemony and ideologies. Tourist art is no different from other categories of African art; Araeen (2002: 344) claims in this case that all art is supplied for the commodity market – it is essentially market driven.[51] Valentin Mudimbe asserts that tourist art should be situated between the tradition-inspired and the modernist trends. Both these trends function as "export goods" for the international market (Mudimbe 1994: 162).

I find Jean Baudrillard's interpretations of objects (in an extremely broad sense) relevant to my discussion of African cultural objects and artworks as a form of African material culture in commodity culture. Baudrillard defines the notions of the classification and social differentiation of objects as follows:

> You never consume the object in itself; you are always manipulating objects (in
> the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to

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[51] I would like to raise this point in my argument, although I regard Araeen's use of 'all art' as a gross generalisation.

your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status (1998: 61).

African cultural production and art, as sustained by Western society, can purportedly be seen as commodities when they are reinterpreted through the additional characteristics of exchange value and the complexity of socio-historical development and its relations.[52] The commodification of African cultural objects should, on the one hand, be understood in the way the objects engage the contradictory economic logic of globalisation, which obscures their generation in labour as functional objects or utilities. On the other hand, one should be cognisant of the important role the objects have as arbitrary items into an allegedly self-referential system of representations, which allocates the object's meaning in relations to its original value (before it is consumed, possessed or sold).

Baudrillard argues that everyone in the current consumer society is affected by the modes or effects of consumption and commodities (Kellner 2005 [Online]). Kellner explains how "individuals gain understanding by identifying themselves with the things that surround them and histories that shape them" (2005 [Online]). These notions can be applied to the way in which tourist art, which can be seen as commodities in consumer society, serves as a vehicle which can create an ideological and imaginary idea of Africa in contemporary visual culture. Essentialised notions of Africa can be largely attributed to the dominance of Western discourses in the consumption of African art, largely through patronage and request for the works. Kasfir states that in his view "the West has invented meaning (and in this case denied authenticity) in African art. Without patronage it [tourist art] would not exist" (1999: 100). What appeals to Western collectors of African material culture is, according to Kasfir, indelibly marked by cultural distance between the producer and the collector, and the "corresponding lack of information about the artist that it usually implies". Kasfir elaborates: "Ironically, it is not knowledge but ignorance of the subject that ensures its authenticity ... the all-in-one anonymity that one artist's work can stand for a whole culture, since the whole culture is assumed to be homogenous (yet at the same time unique)" (1999: 94).

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[52] See also Appadurai's (1986) discussion on the notion of social relations between the production and the exchange value of African cultural objects' value. Appadurai is of the opinion that "economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the forms or functions of exchange makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly" (1986: 3).

To illustrate the distinction and similarities of popular African art to tourist art, I look at the 'urban art' category in *Africa Explores*, which is also commonly called 'popular art'. The latter category is explained by Vogel as works of art that are made by "artists who make signs and other commercial images for small businesses ... they also make 'art to look at'" (1991: 9). These artworks are produced in vast volumes and the work might be seen as quite repetitive. Such works of art are predominantly sold to urban workers and European buyers, and Vogel states that the artist are "rather like craftspeople, making art to earn a living" (*ibid.*).

Kasfir comments on the overlapping categories in *Africa Explores* as this blurs the boundaries of the distinctive characteristics of the groups. Kasfir explains how the 'urban' art category that one might suppose to consider as "street-corner art is work made primarily for local consumption", also those works categorised under 'traditional' artists who produce work for the tourist market, as well as the 'new functional' artist (1992: 56). The problem with the limited categorisation in Vogel's exhibition goes so far as (for a viewer) to distinguish between 'traditional' artists selling their work to a tourist market and 'international' artists to foreigners in galleries. Kasfir (1992: 56) explains that the art in galleries is sold as "presumably authentic, since it is included in the catalog and show", and the 'urban' and 'traditional' art is seen as having a "kind of unspoken authenticity" (1922: 62). In Kasfir's review of *Africa Explores* he further notes that "art made openly for foreigners by non-elite artists is a taboo subject, a bracketed category which the organizers (and most museums) would like to forget" (1992: 62).

Kasfir states on this argument that the concern with commodification is strongly felt by collectors, "[w]hen the market is limited to village chiefs and age-grades; commodification doesn't come into the picture, but as soon as urban art develops within a hegemonic (colonial or neo-colonial) collecting context, commodification arises out of the distancing of the patron (both geographically and culturally)" (1992: 64). He explains that the failure to resist commodification in African art makes it the obverse of avant-garde art for the reason that "African art does not in any way fetishize invention for its own sake, nor is there any sense in which *making* art is seen as an act of either rebellion or self-expression"; as a result it is "mainly] the Western collector's obsession with uniqueness that causes commodification to be seen as totally unacceptable"[53] (1992: 64). Consequently, what is assumed by the Western viewer to be 'inauthentic' in African art is based on self-contradiction, as the extensive requests

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[53] Kasfir states in this regard that the exception is "certain university-trained artist-intellectuals who have adopted this essentially Western outlook as a conscious intellectual stance" (1992: 64).

and demand for the works (as seen in the great number of tourist markets) sustain these markets. African artists who work for the tourist market are also notoriously alert to the demand of their customers. Vogel states that,

> Today, the interaction between African artist and patron in general continues the traditional relationship between artist and client, and between the artist and the work. It is an underlying assumption of the traditional artist's role that the client is a collaborator in the making of the work, which will reflect his or her ideas as much as or more than the artist's (1991: 21).

Bernadette van Haute, elaborates on this idea by arguing that:

> Contrary to the popular belief, tourist art came into being very soon after the first contact between the coloniser and the colonised. As part of their imperial strategy, colonial powers deliberately suppressed precolonial cultures in a policy of assimilation, aimed at the suppression of difference. In the process the coloniser attempted to wipe out distinctive collectivities and yet, at the same time, they contributed to the formation of new art forms (2008: 22).

Western demand for African art did not only create a new market, but also led to the fabrication of an imaginary tradition of what is supposedly considered as 'African'. The notion of 'authenticity'[54] became important in the Western mindset for judging the value of African objects, which Kasfir ascribes to the Western collectors' obsession with "fetishized uniqueness" (1992: 66). Kasfir explains that the supposed 'authenticity' of an object was derived from the fact that the object was "made to be used by the same society that produced it" (1999: 90). Kasfir describes the awkwardness of the binary oppositions present in African art that is produced within such a colonial or postcolonial context. She explains that, according to Western discourses, "it is 'inauthentic' because it was created after the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently, tourist and the new African elite" (*ibid*).

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[54] In a case-study in *Debates on Innovation and Paradigms of Authenticity,* Marvin Cohodas summarises the notion of authenticity in the context of Western dealings with non-Western cultures as not being "an essential trait of objects or practices but a discursive boundary-making construction specifically associated with late-Victorian anthropological imaginings of 'primitive' societies and contemporaneous curio market valuations. Through its construction of alterity, it served to maintain the modernization paradigm as an ideological component of subordination and exploitation of colonized societies" (1999: 146-147).

The nature and consumption of tourist art has largely been dictated by Western thought and demand for African cultural objects. African cultural identity and its integration into a global capitalistic structure as an 'African aesthetic style' are predominantly enforced by an essentialised and homogenous representation of Africa. Edward Said explains on the notion of cultural identity as follows:

> Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there are today from America to the rest of the world … Yet it is also true that in the main we have rarely been so fragmented, so sharply reduced, and so completely diminished in our own senses of what our true (as opposed to asserted) cultural identity is. (1993: 319, 320)

The "canonical character" of African art is defined by Kasfir as an "ambiguous ethnographic present [that] denies it history, [and the] insistence on the anonymity of African artists [whom] denies it individuality" (1999: 94). She concludes that the lack of history and individuality results from "the way that African art is usually collected in the first place – stolen or negotiated through the mediation of traders or other outsiders – we have come to accept it as part of the art's canonical character" (*ibid.*).

According to Marianna Torgovnick, another way of describing the value and status that African objects acquire, and the extent to which many African artists are influenced to adopt 'primitive' styles in order to satisfy Western consumption and ideas, is as follows:

> In the deflationary era of postmodernism, the primitive often frankly loses any particular identity and even its sense of being "out there"; it merges into a generalized, marketable thing – a grab-bag primitive in which urban and rural, modern and traditional Africa and South American and Asia and the Middle East merge into a common locale called the third world which exports garments and accessories, music, ideologies, and styles for Western, and especially urban Western, consumption (1990: 37).

Kasfir explains that tourist art may be seen as the most significant example, or in her words the "worst-case scenario" of all the varieties of African art to illustrate the "distaste of connoisseurs and subvert the issue of authenticity" (1999: 90). Kasfir explains the so-called 'inauthenticity' of tourist art with regards to the stylistic development of African art. She states that "in the biological model of stylistic development it exemplifies 'decay' or even 'death'; in

the discussion of quality it is dismissed as crude, mass produced and crassly commercial; in the metaphors of symbolic anthropology it is impure, polluted; in the salvage anthropology paradigm it is already lost" (*ibid.*). With regards to Kasfir's view on tourist art, she explains that the Center of African Art in New York decided to "omit it [tourist art] from its supposedly definitive contemporary art exhibition *Africa Explores* presumably for all of the above reasons" (1999: 100). This discussion on the assumed value judgements that adhere to tourist art can be directed at the idea that emphasises the contradiction between the demand and the perceptive evaluation of tourist art. Kasfir elaborates on the controversial perception of African art, by claiming that: "Ironically, what we could call canonical African art – that which is collected and displayed and hence authenticated and valorised as 'African art' – was and is only produced under conditions that ought to preclude the very act of collecting" (1999: 90).

The authors cited thus far who contextualise the reading of African cultural objects emphasise the divergent and also subjective readings on the objects. Another voice in this debate is that of art historian Ruth Phillips, who makes a distinction in her article "Why Not Tourist Art? Silence in Native American Museum Representations" between cultural objects as traditional objects and art objects. Ruth Phillips explains in this article on her study and research on tourist art that these objects can be recognised as art objects. Phillips's study was centred on the Chicago's Field Museum where a display case (Figure 12) was used in which objects were categorised as "art" "decorative art", and "non-art". This study was intended to inform the public about the category of 'primitive art' (Errington 1998: 62). Phillips, accordingly, explains her difficulty with the position (or rather absence) of tourist art in the display case that she encountered.

> Tourist art did not even make it into the display case as non-art in 1986; it was beneath the level of conscious attention. As a matter of note it appears to me that "tourist art" – that is, objects made deliberately for the market by third and fourth world people and made deliberately to signify the "primitive" or the "ethnic" – is currently making an accelerating fast climb out of the murk of invisible rubbish and becoming respectable transient objects (in Errington 1998: 62).

Although Phillips's study was on Native American art, the intention and value system she studied is also applicable in some ways to African art, as specifically seen in Vogel's exhibition *Africa Explores*, by emphasising the exclusion of tourist art as one of the categories in her presentation of 20th-century African art from the exhibition
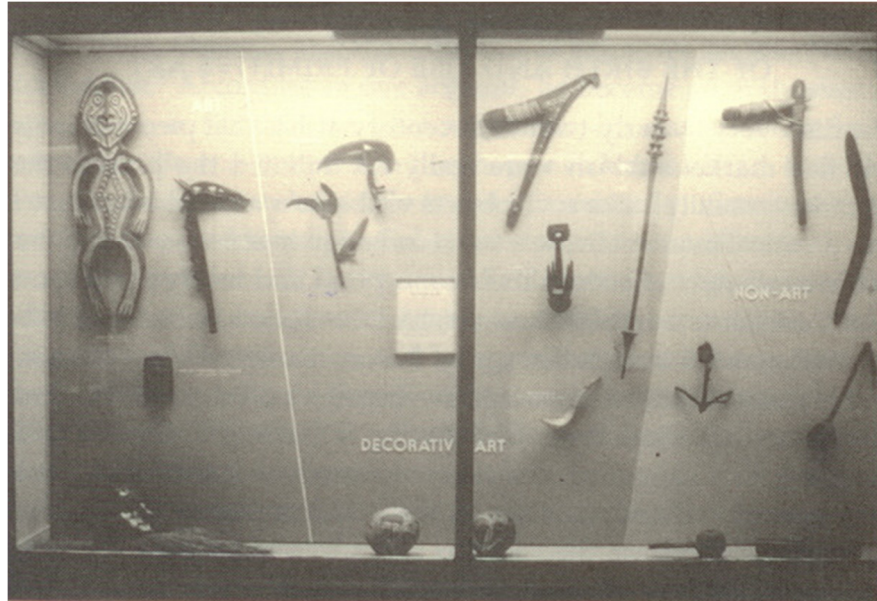
FIGURE 12: A Display Case in Chicago's Field Museum (1986). (Primitive) ART, DECORATIVE ART, and (miserable thing) NON-ART (Errington 1998: 62).

Tourist art is largely based on its discursive construction, as its value, as part of contemporary African art, is determined by the spectator and people who frame it as such. The conception of tourist art has often been narrated by the West, which lays the foundation for a sociological and economic understanding of the continual revaluation of these objects. *Africa Explores* and several other exhibitions such as *"Primitivism" in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984), *Magiciens de la Terra* (1989)*, Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2008) and *Africa Remix* (2005), have challenged debates around essentialisms on 'Africanness'; on its display, (re)presentation and incorporation of African material culture in contemporary exhibitions, in order to critique hegemonic appraisals and debates on Africa.

3.4 Conclusion

As the distinction between tourist art, traditional cultural objects, international art and urban art is difficult – if not sometimes impossible – to make, this chapter showed how the various trends and the overlapping of aesthetic styles to be traced in African material culture in the form of African art are enclosed in a limited and constricted form dialogue. As dialogue is not illuminated in this chapter as a relationship, I rather argue that debates around African material culture in 20th-century can be seen as contestation of meaning of the divergence of competing voices in which Western perceptions and narratives dominate the discussions and debates. According to Thomas McEvilly's article "The Selfhood of the Other: Reflections of a

Westerner on the Occasion of an Exhibition of Contemporary Art from Africa" in the catalogue for *Africa Explores*, he explains that when one culture looks at the objects of another culture, those objects are "instantly incorporated into an alien mental framework [through the way the objects] are interpreted through some habit of thought different from the habit of their makers" (1991: 268).

Considering the diverse impact of Western hegemonies and the extent of their control over African cultural production, tourist art is intricately tied to discourses of power and the discursive construction of Western ideologies. One of the most prominent Western ideologies that have been debated with regards to the phenomenon of tourist art, is around ideas of (in)authenticity. Through my investigation of African art as a form of African material culture, incorporated into a contemporary framework, it is a difficult – if not an impossible – task to break with the dominant Western perceptions that frame African material culture. Commodity culture with its various institutionalised establishments has an immense impact on the dialogic relations that frame African material culture.

CHAPTER 4

'DIALOGIC JEWELLERY' AS A CRITICAL RENEGOTIATION OF THE NOTION OF AN 'AFRICAN AESTHETIC STYLE'

In this chapter I investigate what I refer to as dialogic jewellery as a practice that draws visually on certain postcolonial and/or postmodern discourses (such as those associated with hybridity and liminality) to stress the ambivalent and intertextual nature of certain forms of contemporary jewellery design. These jewellery practices draw on certain postmodern/postcolonial strategies of destabilising modernity and colonialism, while they also reflect on these discourses on an 'African aesthetic style'. By drawing on the discursive platform that was established in the previous chapters, I discuss 'dialogic jewellery' practices as a space for critical and self-reflexive investigations of an 'African aesthetic style'. My own design conceptual development draws on hybridity, liminality and postmodern forms of play to offer a renegotiation of the notion of an essential, timeless or coherent 'African aesthetic style'.

4.1: A Brief Introduction to Postmodern Forms of Play of Contemporary Jewellery Design

Thus far my discussion of African cultural objects has established that the reading of African cultural objects is framed by various discourses, display practices and writings. In this chapter I consider how contemporary jewellery design, as an art practice is also influenced and framed by the social, cultural and historical circumstances of the period in which the practice originated. Postmodernism[55] will be discussed as the discursive framework that underlies contemporary jewellery as an art practice.

As stated by Paul Derrez in *New Directions in Jewellery* (2005: 12), it is important to acknowledge that contemporary jewellery design developed as a conceptual form of art over the last thirty years. Derrez lays emphasis on the commencement of contemporary jewellery design in the late 1960s as a result of a questioning of social, political and cultural structures in

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[55] I find Simon Blackburn's explanation of postmodernism relevant as it provides an understanding of the way and the context within which I discuss African cultural objects. Blackburn explains this concept in the following way, "postmodernism is associated with a playful acceptance of surfaces and superficial style, self-conscious quotation and parody (although these are also found in modernist literature), and a celebration of the ironic, the transient, and the glitzy. It is usually seen as a reaction against a naïve and earnest confidence in progress, and against confidence in objective or scientific truth. In philosophy, therefore, it implies a mistrust of the *grands récits* of modernity: the large-scale justifications of western society and confidence in its progress visible in Kant, Hegel, or Marx, or arising from utopian visions of perfection achieved through evolution, social improvement, education, or the deployment of science" (1996, Sv, 'postmodernism').

Western society. This was a period in which traditional (commercial jewellery) structures began to be broken down, and Derrez emphasises that there was "simultaneously an invigorating and exciting experimentation in jewellery design [which was most evident in] Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Austria" (2005:12).

Such a development of contemporary jewellery design corresponds to the growth of postmodern forms of thought, both of which are, albeit as design or discursive strategies, complex and often difficult to define. In Linda Hutcheon's article "Postmodernism" she explains that, for some, postmodernism is seen as "a mere 'moment', while for others it was a more general 'condition'. Some denigrated it to just a 'style'; still other elevated it to a historical period" (2006: 115). According to Stuart Sim, postmodernism is a complex term to define, because of its multiple, inconsistent and ambiguous characteristics. There have been numerous debates around the actual meaning of the term, but since the middle of the 20th century the term 'postmodernism' has largely been regarded as "a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries" (Sim 2006: vii), more specifically, what Bryan Turner refers as the fragmentation of "the West's institutionalization of unilinear history and systems of means" (2006, Sv, 'postmodernism').

Linda Hutcheon furthermore explains how postmodernism, together with poststructuralism, challenged "Western cultural assumptions about totalities and coherent unities, logic and reason, consciousness and subjectivity, representation and truth(s), the history with which the postmodern concerned itself was not the single, neutral or objective" (2006: 122). Hutcheon describes the complex cultural and artistic relationship between 'post' and 'modern' in the term 'postmodernism' as follows: "[It] is one of critical rethinking, leading either to a continuation and often an intensification (of irony, parody, self-reflexivity) or a rejection (of a historicity, barriers against the popular)" (2006: 118).[56] Postmodernism can be seen as equally revolutionary and complex as the political and social history from which it originated. In this

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[56] Also see Austin Harrington's definition of postmodernism, specifically in art theory, as an association with, the disappearance of any single dominant centre of artistic innovation since the 1970s. It is associated with a discrediting of prejudices in favour of 'depth', 'purity' and 'authenticity' in art over against surface, play, eclecticism and hybridization between genres, forms and materials. It is associated with the dissolution of binary oppositions between 'high culture' and 'low culture' and a blurring of art's boundaries into popular culture and the mass media (2004: 21).

view, Hutcheon explains that postmodernism is "both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet engaged with the real world history – as known through its historiographic narratives – postmodern writing was both ironically intertextual and historically engaged" (2006: 123).

Hutcheon states that ideas surrounding representation, which are central to postmodern enquiries into modes of visual representation,

> do not so much *reflect* us and our world (as realist fiction implied) as grant meaning and value to both … meaning is never considered single, authentic, pure, closed and homogeneous – and guaranteed by the author's authority and originality, instead it is plural, hybrid, shifting, open and heterogeneous – and thus inviting collaboration with the reader: again, both inward-looking and outward-looking (2006:123).

In *Postmodernism and the Art of Identity* Christopher Reed explains the overlap and the convergence of boundaries, which I find applicable when investigating the way in which African material culture is incorporated into, specifically, contemporary jewellery practices.

> Postmodernists see representation and reality as overlapping, because conventions of representation or language ('signification') are learned and internalized so that we experience them as real ... what we perceive as real is revealed to be always present in and filtered through representation. For the postmodernist, then, nothing we can do or say is truly 'original', for our thoughts are constructed from our experience of a lifetime of representations, so it is naïve to imagine a work's author inventing its forms or controlling its meaning. Instead of pretending to an authoritative originality, postmodernism concentrates on the way images and symbols ('signifiers') shift or lose their meaning when put in different contexts (Reed 1993: 272).

This comment by Reed emphasises that meaning is not stable and fixed. Because the meanings that are allocated to and lifted from both artworks and writings are not fixed, every viewer

interprets the work in a different way, according to his or her experiences with and relations to the work (whether it is conceptual or personal).[57]

By looking at contemporary jewellery design and the various (often divergent) definitions that have been used to define this practice, I find 'dialogic jewellery' as a form of contemporary jewellery most relevant to my discussion and focus on the various discussions, interpretations and understandings that constitute and represent an 'African aesthetic style'. Such a divergent discussion of contemporary jewellery draws largely on Hutcheon's discussion of postmodern characteristics that surround visual representations and of meaning, which is "never considered single, authentic, pure, closed and homogeneous … instead it is plural, hybrid, shifting, open and heterogeneous". I specifically investigate how various forms of dialogue emerge between the viewer, the producer and the particular context in which the jewellery objects are produced and displayed. Another aspect that I explore is the effectiveness of dialogue to actually facilitate plurality and open-endedness in jewellery design, and I also draw attention to places where forms of dialogue are hindered within jewellery design practices.

Liesbeth den Besten (2003) defines contemporary jewellery by referring to the craft-based past in which it resides and from which it draws. According to Den Besten (2003), the contemporary jeweller has become "an inhabitant of the border area between art and craft"; she adds that contemporary jewellers can "choose whatever [they] want from both areas, and from all disciplines ... [and reject] the decorative and subordinate character of jewellery".[58]

Jivan Astfalck also elaborates on the differences between contemporary jewellery design and the centuries-old craft (fine art) tradition out of which it originated in comparison to commercial jewellery practices. Accordingly, Jivan states:

> It is not necessarily the 'art-full' crafting of the object or an obvious radical aesthetic which defines some jewellery as a fine art practice; but, more interestingly, it is its integrity of enquiry, knowledge of contemporary culture

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[57] In this view, it is also important to note that various jewellers that work with the idea of an 'African aesthetic style' in their work will interpret and draw on interpretations of African material culture in a different way – an issue that I unpack later in this chapter.

[58] Den Besten's emphasis on contemporary jewellers' interdisciplinary approach to their work is particularly relevant when discussing my own interpretation and incorporation of African material culture in my work – an idea that I return to later in this chapter.

issues, confidence in using artistic strategies and the thought processes which inform the making practice and thus pushing the boundaries of the discipline. These artistic methodologies differ from 'classical' design process in so far as they take their dynamic from a content-based inquiry rather than from a purely formal, material-based or skill-driven approach (2005:19).

Contemporary jewellery has a highly contentious and debatable relationship to production and conventional mainstream jewellery practices. Contemporary jewellery is considered a subsidiary establishment on the periphery of mainstream jewellery practices, caught between the poles of craft and art, artistic and skilled practices. Benjamin Lignel states in the *Metalsmith Magazine* that "whatever specific meaning [contemporary jewellery] may have had is now superseded by a vague sense of institutionalised 'otherness'" (2006 [Online]). The jewellery designer as an inhabitant on the threshold of contemporary jewellery practices emphasises the dialogic relationship that this practice has to a postmodern representation with regards to the convergence and assimilation of styles and discourses.

Lin Cheung in her article "Wear, Wearing, Worn: The Transitions of Jewels to Jewellery" in the book *New Directions in Jewellery II* states that contemporary jewellery is seen as "a vehicle for makers to express their artistic thought, material concerns, attitudes to society, beliefs, fashion trends, cultural viewpoints, customs, and rituals … [contemporary jewellery] also has the endless capacity to hold personal, unique meaning for the wearer, eventually valuing the piece beyond its initial design and conception" (2005: 12).   My representations of African cultural objects entail a postmodern approach, which I apply in my recreation of jewellery objects in order to disrupt modernist tendencies, which are characterised by compulsion with purpose, seriousness, order and classification. I analyse the formal and preconceived elements which characterised African material culture within a postmodern discourse, laden with ironies, polemic and play. Ihab Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* summarises the binary oppositions of modern and postmodern strategy when he states that "much of modernism appears hieratic, hypotactical, and formalist, [while] postmodernism strikes us by contrast as playful, paratactical, and deconstructionist" (1987: 91).

4.2: Key Discourses that Frame 'Dialogic Jewellery' Practices
4.2.1: Liminality
For the purpose of my thesis I specifically use the term 'liminality' to investigate my own work in particular as it relates to forms of 'dialogic jewellery'. The concept of a 'liminal state' was

established by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep and derives from his study of the ritual passages in small-scale societies.[59] Van Gennep conceptualises liminality as "a rite de passage [that] consists of three stages: the separation, or detachment of a subject from its stabilized environment; the margin, which is an ambiguous state for the subject; and the aggregation, in which the passage has completed and the subject has crossed the threshold into a new fixed, stabilized state" (2004 [Online]).

Another anthropologist who also dealt with the term 'liminality' is Victor Turner. Turner draws on Van Gennep's model and the three phases that the latter identifies. Turner departs from Van Gennep by specifically emphasising the *becomingness* of the liminal state. Turners states that the first phase of separation comprises "symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a 'state')" (Turner 1987: 5). The second state that Turner explains is the stage of liminality that exists "in periods when societies are in liminal transition between different social structures", where a new sense of "communitas" emerges (1974: 47). Turner defines the "ritual subject (the passenger)" during the liminal period as ambiguous (1987: 5). The liminal space can be articulated as the space where language (through dialogic interaction) can be reframed and represented in the liminal space as it no longer communicates the precise meaning, neither the contrary of what is represented. Victor Turner explains the initiand in his or her liminal state "As having departed but not yet arrived, he [the initiand/subject] is at once no longer classified and not yet classified ... neither one thing nor the other; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or even be nowhere in space-time of structural classification" (1967: 96-97). The final stage of the *rite of passage* refers to the symbolic and physical reintegration of the initiand back into society as a 'different' person.

Turner regards liminality as a space of creativity and transformation. As he writes:

> To my mind it is the analysis of culture into factors and their free combination in
> any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is most characteristic of
> liminality, rather than the establishment of implicit syntax-like rules or the

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[59] Also see Bjorn Thomassen's definition of ritual passages "as the transition from boyhood to manhood ... [as] both destructive and constructive, as the formative experiences during liminality will prepare the initiand (and his or her cohort) to occupy a new social role or status, made public during the reintegration rituals" (2006: 322-323).

development of an internal structure of logical relations of oppositions and mediation (1974: 255).

The significance of such a conception of liminality in my thesis is to enable consideration of how contemporary jewellery, as a visual art practice, can be seen as a liminal space where transformations are made possible. Hein Viljoen and Chris Van der Merwe (2007: 11), in their comprehensive introduction to liminality, hybridity and third space, describe such transformation that occurs through liminality as "transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being". I draw on this definition to investigate contemporary jewellery design as a site where such "new ways of thinking and being" are played out.

4.2.2: Hybridity and Third Space

In addition to Van Gennep's and Turner's formulations of liminality, hybridity as a concept also has relevance to my discussion on the manifestation and transformation of an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery practices.

I am specifically interested in hybridity and dialogue as a space for cultural interaction. Viljoen and Van der Merwe explains that "in biology, a hybrid is a new species that is the result of the crossbreeding between two species" (2007: 5). Applied to cultural interchange, Viljoen and Van der Merwe explain that the "metaphor is somewhat limited, as cultural exchange mostly takes place between a culture regarded as superior and one regarded as inferior. The two cultures are not on an equal footing, one dominates the other in prestige, in creativity, in power, etc." (2007: 5). Viljoen and Van der Merwe describe the cross-breeding that takes place as "a kind of double movement whereby the receiver culture both appropriates and abrogates, transforms the donor culture, but is in turn transformed by the elements it takes up and the in-between spaces that are created in the process" (2007: 5).

Homi Bhabha also uses the concept of hybridity to draw attention to conditions of colonial inequity. As Homi Bhabha maintains:

> Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that
> reserves the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that 'other' 'denied'

knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition (1994: 114).

Paul Meredith explains Bhabha's analysis of hybridity as an "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitation of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorization of cultural identity" (1998: 3); it is a space where "a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist identity" (1998: 2).

In addition to his definition of hybridity, Bhabha's formulation of the third space is equally important. The concept of the third space was presented by Bhabha for considering the subversion and disruption of the hegemonic binary thinking of colonial narratives. Bhahba explains in terms of the third space that "what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 1994: 1). Bhabha argues that (as an ambivalent site) the third space "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites for collaboration and contestation" (1994: 1). Bhabha explains that the discursive conditions of the third space and the manifestation of cultures confirms "that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (1995: 208). The third space, as explained by Bhabha, can be seen as intentionally challenging the homogenisation and essentialisation of cultural identity. Thus the third space, as I employ it in my investigation of the incorporation and renegotiation of African material culture in contemporary jewellery practices, can be seen as a useful space for reflecting on dialogue that shapes these practices.[60]

In addition to Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, I also draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's explication of the term hybriditisation. Writing within the field of linguistics, Bakhtin defines hybriditisation as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within

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[60] See also Viljoen and Van der Merwe, who draw on Bhabha's formulation of the third space as an in-between space that had previously been "rejected by all [and has] become a liminal space, a melting pot of creativity" (2007: 3).

the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (1981: 358). I find this formulation particularly relevant insofar as I see 'dialogic jewellery' as a space, as an 'encounter' where different social languages (or, I argue, different modes of communication) come together and are mixed. The relation between African and Western discourses in 'dialogic jewellery', for example, allows for a complex encounter in which the producer and viewer play important roles in interpreting the work and the discourses that such pieces might draw on.

Bakhtin further explains how social language contains various references and quotations of the others' words, which shows the "dialogized interrelation of language" (Bakhtin 1981: 358).[61] Bakhtin defines social language as the:

> concrete, living, integral mass made up of all the markers that give the language its social profile, a profile that by defining itself through semantic shifts and lexical choices can be established even within the boundaries of a linguistically unitary language. A social language, then, is a concrete socio-linguistic belief system that defines a distinct identity for itself within the boundaries of a language that is unitary only in the abstract (1981: 356).

Within the framework of social language, Bakhtin makes a distinction between two kinds of linguistic hybridity, namely unconscious hybridity and intentional hybridity. For the purpose of my thesis, I will specifically look at intentional hybridity. Bakhtin sees intentional hybridity as a space that is not just concerned with a mixing of symbols and elements across boundaries of language and cultures, but rather a comprehensive image of that language through a continuous process of social, historical and ideological development. Pnina Werbner explains how intentional hybrids "create an ironic double consciousness, a collision between differing points of views on the world" (1997: 5). In Bakhtin's theory on double consciousness, "doubleness of hybrid voices is composed not through the integration of differences but via a series of dialogical counterpoints, each set against the other, allowing the language to be both the same and different" (Papastergiadis 1997: 267). Hybrids constructed within historical, social and ideological foundations often intend to "shock, change, challenges, revitalise or

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[61] Viljoen and Van der Merwe explains the way in which Bakhtin explains social language as a space of exchange and dialogue, an encounter where an author's words are quoted "in a different intonation, framing them in a certain way or placing them in a different context" (2007: 6).

disrupt" through deliberate synthesis other than symbols and elements of social language (Werbner 1997: 5).

Bakhtin further defines intentional hybridity as the "perception of one language by another language" (1981: 359). Bakhtin's definition of hybridity allows for a perspective on cultures as they are dialogically constructed and embedded within social, historical and ideological discourses. I find such a framework of hybridity applicable to my discussion of contemporary jewellery, which is best described in a postmodern framework, which is characterised by open-endedness, heterogeneity and its engagement with the relationship between viewer and reader.

In the context of my thesis, these concepts of hybridity and the third space can allow for tracing divergent and changing articulations of African material culture, in particular the assimilation of discourses and styles, materials and techniques in the definition of an 'African aesthetic style' in the field of contemporary jewellery practices. In this regard, Jonathan Rutherford's understanding of hybridity and the third space is important, as he argues that "for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space', which enables other positions to emerge" (1990: 211).

4.3 Renegotiating an 'African Aesthetic Style' in My Own Practice

> *In studio jewellery the question of the cultural value of different materials, how they are valued by society, has been an important influence... At the end of the twentieth century, perceptions about the cultural value of the arts in general are constantly in flux, which influences all artists including studio jewellers... It is worth remembering that whatever the makers' view of the cultural value of the material, the onlookers' view may be different (Game & Goring 1998: 25).*

The theoretical framework established in the previous chapters serves to inform the discussion of my own work, which is comprised of jewellery pendants (which can also be regarded as objects), a series of chains and a collection of neckpieces. The practical component of my research, with its central thematic concern being the complex dialogical relationship that constitutes the reading of African cultural objects, served as a catalyst for the theoretical arguments explored thus far in this thesis. My investigations on the manifestations of African

material culture, as represented in both colonial and commercialist discourses, has helped me to systematically theorise the thematic concerns I pursued in my practical work. By means of the investigation of dialogue, through writings, production and display practices that support the reading and conversations around numerous interpretations of African cultural objects, I aimed to create a framework in which to situate a discussion of my own work. In this chapter I therefore discuss my practical work as representations (catalysts) of dialogue in relation to the following themes:

- Issues surrounding material value and functionality;

- Dialogic jewellery and display practices.

My investigation of the dialogic relations that have bearing on the reading and framing of African cultural objects as discussed throughout my thesis will be visually portrayed in this chapter through an analysis of my practical work. My practical collection of work is comprised of two collections, the first collection of my practical work analyses and plays with and, to some degree, distinguishes the formal (and other stereotypical) elements that characterises some forms of African material culture. For example, I draw on and renegotiate certain formal and symbolic elements such as the spiral, snuff containers, techniques of wrapping cotton thread and decorative pipes found in African material culture. Interpretations regarding the use of material, as well as issues of the functionality and originality of African material culture, will be dealt with in the first part of this section.

In the second collection I look at and play with notions of exhibitionary displays, as discussed in Chapter 2. I explore the extent to which my jewellery, framed in a contemporary exhibitionary context, has a bearing on the reading of the work. Throughout this discussion I will explore the diverse aspects that underlie my own work as dialogic jewellery practice – that is, how such pieces facilitate an interchange of ideas that contributes to both the producer's and reader's interpretation of African material culture and, in particular, the complex notion of an 'African aesthetic style'. Both these collections draw on certain visual and textual references, namely Angela Fischer's book *Africa Adorned* (1984), which consists of numerous examples of African material culture and African cultural objects, and Sidney Kasfir's article "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow" (1999). I discuss each collection by firstly presenting a photographic image as well as the image caption as reference, after which I will present my response and interpretation through another photographic image and a discussion of my own work. These images that I present as references to base my arguments and response on depict African cultural objects, as they were largely used within the African cultures. My commentary

on the references (images) can be seen as a visual exploration of the numerous and divergent conversations and writings that frame African material culture in contemporary displays.

In order to discuss dialogic jewellery as a contemporary jewellery art practice it is necessary to examine the role of dialogue in the interpretation of an 'African aesthetic style'. Nicholas Bourriaud, a French art critic, describes artistic practices as a dynamic of social interaction, a view which is relevant to my discussion on dialogic relationships in the interpretation of dialogic jewellery. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, which is largely concerned with art that emerged in the nineties, Bourriaud defines relational aesthetics as an "aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt" (1998: 112). The function, the underlying message of art, the context in which it is displayed as well as the display methods change and also continually transform over time.

Accordingly, Bourriaud explains that "art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. [it entails] a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue" (1998:15), which can be ascribed to the encounter and relationship between the viewer and the artwork, as well as manifold explanations of meaning. The visual understanding and meanings of artworks has, in Bourriaud's opinion, become more complex as our visual references are contingent upon our social contexts. In my discussion of dialogic jewellery I highlight the importance and necessity of often inquiring into the theoretical perspective of relational aesthetics in order to comprehend and identify an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery design. Bourriaud (1998: 21) states that "we judge a work through its plastic or visual form … the contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination." The meaning and significance of a work, in Bourriaud's view, develop through the trajectory of "signs, objects, forms and gestures" (1998: 20).

It is against this backdrop that this chapter engages in the interpretation of an 'African aesthetic style' through dialogic jewellery practices. Such practices entail various interpretations of, and relationships between, stylistic conventions, materials and cultural discourses.

4.3.1 Issues Surrounding Material Value and Functionality

My interpretation and incorporation of African material culture in this thesis renegotiates the tension between the modern and traditional elements found in African material culture.

Hutcheon ascribes the contradictory and paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites as evident in art, such as the traditional and the new, to "the impulse of postmodern art both to exploit and then to undermine the conventions upon which it depends" (2006: 115). I am particularly interested in the overlap and interplay between these elements. My own take on this issue entails a playful engagement in the recreation of what is regarded as 'tourist art' and the commodification of African material culture. I re-evaluate the use of material, function and idea in the production of the jewellery pieces.
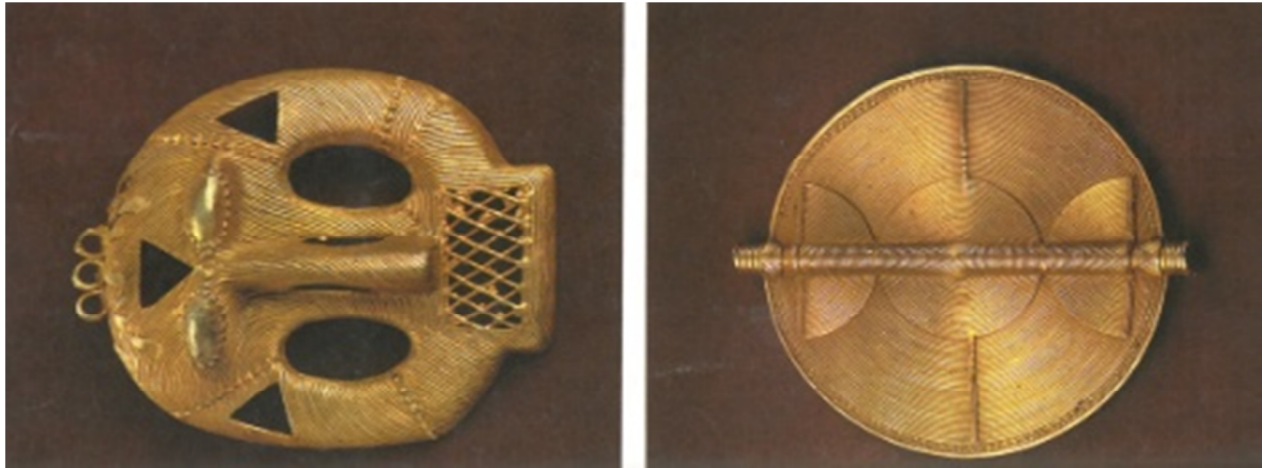
Figure 13: "Baoule Gold. Delicately cast pendants, worn by chiefs or royalty. Like many Baoule beads, these pendants have cylindrical ridges for the thread to pass through" (Fisher 1984: 95). Photographer: Bruno Piazza. Gillion Crowet Collection (left), Private Collection (right).

Figure 14: Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2010). Silver, brass. Digital Photograph.

Figure 14 draws attention to aspects of detail, focusing on the cylindrical ridges and jump rings,[62] more specifically the way in which the objects can be attached to a chain or thread in order to be worn as a pendant. In this series I engage and play with the recreation of decorative and symbolic detail (the spiral element), as well as the functionality of the objects to be worn as pendants with reference to Figure 13. I manipulated the functionality of the cylindrical ridges in my interpretation of the object by using the cylinder as decorative detail rather than a mechanism for thread or chain to go through. The jump rings that I added to these objects are deliberately made too small in order to prevent the wearer from putting any type of chain through it. The producer (or jeweller) is interdependent on interaction with the viewer/wearer in order to convert the object that I produced into a pendant.

Figure 15: "These snuff containers worn by Maasai elders are made of buffalo and cow horn and have leather lids decorated with old glass beads. They are worn on hand-made iron chains around the neck at all times" (Fisher 1984: 63). Photographer: Heini Schneebeli. Collection Piece.

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[62] A jump ring is a basic, small ring (or mechanism) that can be assembled or attached (soldered) to an object that functions as a ring for a chain, thread or cord to go through, in order to be worn around the neck as a pendant.

Figure 16: Idané Burger, Snuff Containers/Pendants (2010). Silver, brass. Digital Photograph.

Figure 16 shows how I reinterpreted and played with the functionality and medium of the snuff containers, seen in Figure 15, with their main function in mind, which is to contain something. I deliberately left the opening uncovered. Through my approach to the appealing forms and also the function of the container, I attempted to create a location for dialogue by renegotiating the original purpose of the container, as it can no longer fully contain any contents. The viewers can further engage with the work in order to question their initial understanding of the container. The form of dialogue that I attempt to create between the viewer and the producer is not always that evident, as it is a very limited form of dialogue.[63]

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[63] I exhibited some of my work at a group exhibition at the Design Indaba in 2011, which formed part of a selection of jewellery. My objects were also displayed among various other more recognisable jewellery pieces, in jewellery showcases. The reaction of some of the viewers to my largely unrecognisable objects generated various questions regarding the wearability of what were mainly assumed to be jewellery pieces, mainly because of the more recognisable and familiar techniques of jewellery design and also because my objects were displayed as jewellery among the other works. With this perception and responses of the viewers in mind, I came to realise the extent of the dialogue that is created, and sometimes does not exist, as well as the degree to which I can participate in the creation and manipulation of the reading of the work.

Figure 17: "Ball-shaped ivory lip plugs *ekalaitom* worn in the lower lip by elders of some importance in the Turkana community … may be made of ivory, stone or metal" (Fisher 1984: 65). Photographer: Bruno Piazza. Collection Piece.

Figure 18: Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2010). Silver, brass, ivory, paint, citrine. Digital Photograph.

Figure 18 shows another example of my interpretation of an ivory ball-shaped lip plug. My approach to the lip plug is based on a degree of playfulness, through my construal of aspects of design, production techniques and the materials that I use. I used a citrine, a semi-precious stone, which is also a more contemporary material, instead of an ordinary stone as stated in

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the description of the object in Figure 17, which enhanced the material value and embellished the lip plugs that I produced. The smooth lines that are evident in the carved ivory shapes (Figure 17) are the opposite of my interpretation of uneven surfaces and textures. In addition, I added more three-dimensional volume to my interpretation of the lip plug (Figure 18), and thereby attempt to create an even more uncomfortable relation to the objects seen in Figure 17. I also draw on the idea that these lip plugs are for the most part not functional anymore – even in their original form few, if any, persons wear such plugs, and they would surely not be worn by members of a Western audience.

Figure 19: *"Kwottenai kanye,* large gold earrings, worn by a girl once she is married. The top of each earring is bound with red wool or silk to protect the ear, and the blades are incised with patterns, some of flowers, other of cattle" (Fisher 1984: 183). Photographer: Fabby K.J. Nielsen.

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Figure 20: Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2010). Silver, brass, paint, cotton and silk thread. Digital Photograph.

As seen in Figure 20, I over-exaggerate the engraved patterns on the surface of the gold earrings seen in Figure 19. I reinterpreted the delicate patterns, which are usually designs of flowers or of cattle, on the gold earrings in the form of a decorative pierced design in silver and brass. My interpretation of the silk thread in the objects reflects a further decorative reading, rather than the functional significance of the use of silk thread for the protection of the ear. The 'earrings' shown in Figure 20 also have no opening for them to be worn as earrings. Such awareness of the deliberate manipulation of the functionality of the earrings renegotiates the significance of the earrings, which display only the technique and form that I use and bring into play in my interpretation.

Neil Cummings, in his anthology *Reading Things – The Alibi of Use* (1993), developed his research on materiality and the way in which objects are inscribed into various systems of meaning. Cummings is of the opinion that material culture constitutes personal as well as cultural representations, which operate as representative signs (1993: 2). Cummings uses the term "material grammar" to refer to how material culture is seen as representations through which the viewers familiarise themselves with the "living syntax of material" (1993: 7). Cumming's formulation of the idea of a "material grammar" is manifested in my own design practice.

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Figure 21: Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2010). Gold leaf, brass, paint. Digital Photograph.

The materials that I use in my jewellery-making techniques are significant and have a vital connotation for my (and possibly the viewer's) interpretation of African material culture. I mainly work with silver, brass and copper. I use spray-paint or cold enamel (a contemporary medium) and cast it against the material value of ivory. By using ivory-colour paint as a simulation of ivory, I comment on the misrepresentation of the reproduction and representations of African material culture in contemporary jewellery practices. I also use gold leaf and cast this medium against a highly polished brass surface to make a statement on the preciousness of materials and its contribution to the monetary and material value of a jewellery piece, as seen in Figure 21. By renegotiating the significance of materials, by 'playing' with notions of value and originality, I challenge the viewer's perception and expectation of the mediums that I intentionally alter. In this case, I see my work as opening up a space for possible dialogue on the meaning and monetary value of such pieces.
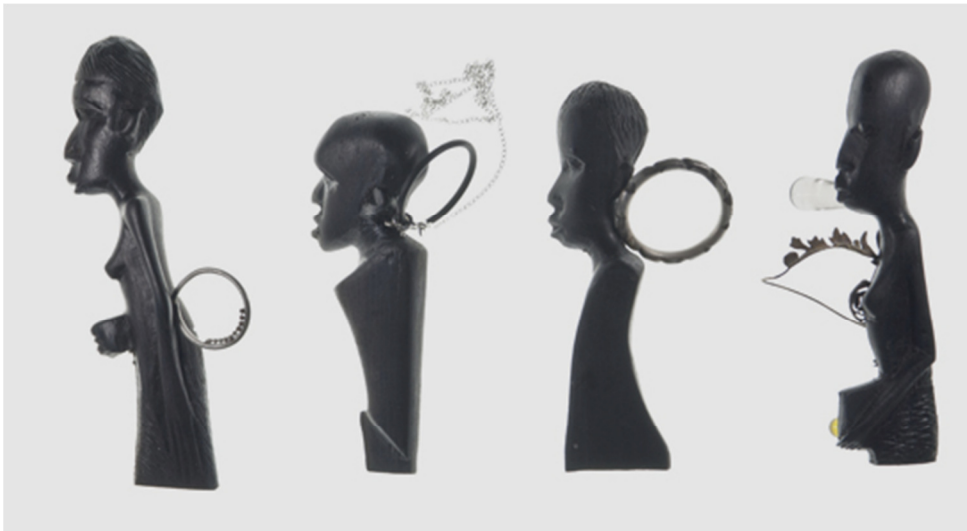
Figure 22: A Pair of Twin Figures - "ere ibeji". Abeokuta area, Yoruba. Wood, glass beads and cowrie shell chain (2005 [Online]).
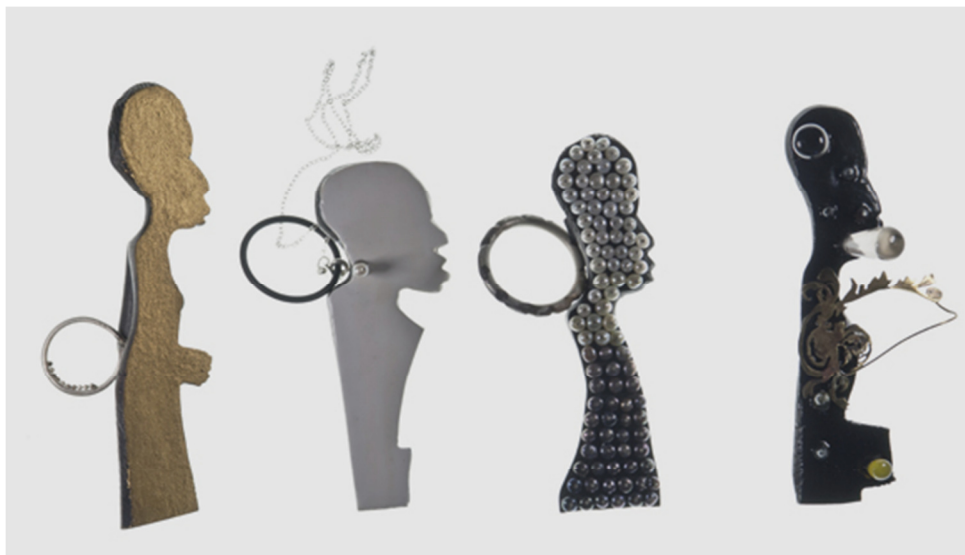
Figure 23 (a): Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2012). Wood, enamel paint, freshwater pearls, gold leaf, brass, silver, rubber, semi-precious stones. Digital Photograph.

Figure 23 (b): Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2012). Wood, enamel paint, freshwater pearls, gold leaf, brass, silver, rubber, semi-precious stones. Digital Photograph.

In another example in Figure 23 (a) and Figure 23 (b) my use of materials gives an elaborate representation of Ibegi twin-cult figures. The clothing and adornment that the figures in Figure 22 wear represent the wealth of the twin's family through the use of cowry shells, pearls, beads or other costly items (2005: [Online]). I used more contemporary materials in my representation of the Ibegi figures and also provide each figure with a very prominent jump ring in order to enhance the numerous readings of the object. Figure 23 (a) represents a jewellery piece when viewed from the back, as the figures are embellished with pearls, semi-precious stones, gold leaf and a glossy layer of paint. Figure 23 (b) can be seen as a representation or reminiscence of a wooden carved, Ibeji twin cult figure when viewed from the front.

Figure 24: Idané Burger, Objects/Pendants (2010). Silver, brass, copper, paint, glass beads, citrine. Digital Photograph.

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Figure 24 shows my consideration of the impact that commodification has on African material culture. I consider elements of mass production and the irony of the obsession of possessing 'faithful copies' in this series. I produced the series of objects, seen in Figure 24, through making a mould of my original sample[64] and then cast 21 of the exact same objects. The series of objects resembles bowls, which are in my opinion commonly available user and consumer items, particularly in many African cultures. The way in which I mass produced the original sample comments on the way in which African material culture is commoditised in contemporary society.

The inside of the object shows an edition number (Figure 24, image on the right) in order to represent the objects as part of a series. The number system that is used with the term "limited edition print" is mostly related to printmaking and is largely associated with mass production. According to Bailey, the term "limited edition print" became "synonymous with hand-crafted, labour-intensive artworks of consequently greater value" (s.a. [Online]). The fixed number of limited editions (e.g. a print numbered 13/21 indicates that it is the 13th print in an edition of 21) indicates that no further copies will be produced and this therefore makes the work more valuable. But I have played with the notion and understanding of a series (as mentioned above) which contains identical copies. In this series the shape of the object remains unchanged; however, the materials are different. I used copper, brass and silver, which are all very different in colour. Not only are the colours not similar to the sample, but they also differ on the other side of the object, which I intentionally 'decorated' with various elements that are largely representative of the way in which African cultural objects are often decorated.

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[64] The original sample was designed through thorough investigation of different forms of bowls and the aesthetic result was the original sample. I then made the final design in brass, through traditional jewellery-making techniques. I did not include the original sample in the series, however, as there is 10% shrinkage in the metal when an object is cast. The result would thus not have been successful as the actual size of the objects would have varied. By leaving the original sample out, I comment on the reproduction and commoditisation of contemporary African art and the obsession with having a 'faithful copy'.

Figure 25: Beads for sale in a Nairobi market stall (1991). (Kasfir 1991: 34). Photograph: Sidney Kasfir.

Figure 26: Idané Burger, Chains (2010). Silver, brass, silver findings and chains, fresh water pearls, glass beads, wood, silk thread, cotton thread, rubber, paint. Digital Photograph.

My collection of chains in Figure 26 draws on the example of a tourist market stall (Figure 25) and the excessive quantities in which such works are produced for a market. Through this collection I refer to the commodification of African cultural production, evoking the debate on the originality of tourist art.

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Figure 27: Idané Burger, Chains (2010). Silver, silver findings and chain, cotton thread, silk thread, wood, rubber. Digital Photograph.

I produced this series of chains with the deliberate intention of making use of an excess of commercial qualities, such as the use of mass-produced clasps, highly polished surfaces, and the inclusion of a machine-produced chain, as seen in Figure 27. I contrast materials, such as glass beads and semi-precious stones with mass-produced chains. Glass beads are appreciated as symbolically valuable items within certain African cultures (Fisher 1984: 53). The manual skills required for certain techniques, such as stringing pearls, producing and constructing segments of the neckpieces that I include and assemble with the chains, draw on commercial and contemporary jewellery practices, as well as on the overlapping of styles and techniques that are characteristic of contemporary jewellery practices. Figure 28 shows an example of representing the creative tension and interplay between what I interpret as an African cultural object (snuff container) and the influence of commodification of African material culture. I incorporated the *925-stamp*, which is a commercially recognisable sign for sterling silver, indicating the specific material value of the metal.

Figure 28: Idané Burger, 2010. Objects/Pendants. Silver, brass. Digital Photograph.

Theorist Mieke Bal states in her book *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* that "viewers bring their own cultural baggage to images", which means that "there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined, or unified meaning" (2001: 71). Drawn from Bal's association of meaning and the unpredictability of the viewer's understanding in defining visual culture, I specifically play with these notions in my work. With the intention of creating a space for interaction through the exchange of ideas and interpretations of my 'dialogic jewellery' collections, I attempt to challenge the viewer's perception of my work. I deliberately focus on the tension between certain mediums and manipulate the function of the objects in my work.

4.3.2 'Dialogic Jewellery' and Display Practices

I use my exhibition space and various display methods in order to demonstrate the dialogic reading that constitutes my jewellery design practice. As discussed in Chapter 2, the context in which African material culture is displayed has tremendous bearing in the contextualisation and understanding of African cultural production. I play with the extent to which certain display strategies alter and also frame the meaning of the work.

My collection of objects/pendants is displayed on separate stands (Figure 29), such as those found in curio shops. Through displaying the objects on small stands that are placed on the floor, the viewer has to view the work in a supposedly unfamiliar manner – similar to viewing work at a tourist market. This way of presenting the objects is in contrast to more conventional displays of jewellery, seen in showcases with concentrated lighting. The objects are also left

uncovered as they are displayed on the stands, which further emphasises the association the viewer may bring to objects that are displayed in a curio market, and also further subverting the way the viewer would engage with valuable jewellery pieces. The conventional viewer might be expecting to see a jewellery collection rather than a collection of objects. With this idea in mind I intentionally made all the objects to be worn as pendants, with the chains being displayed separately from the objects. It is thus the interplay and engagement with the objects or jewellery pieces that generate the new meaning of the object.

Figure 29: Idané Burger, Stands with Objects (2012). Digital Photograph.

Figure 30 depicts a series of brooches that represents a handkerchief.[65] The material of a handkerchief "can be symbolic of the social-economic class of the user, not only because some materials are more expensive, but because some materials are more absorbent and practical for those who use a handkerchief for more than style" (Wikipedia Sv, 'handkerchief'). I converted the handkerchiefs into brooches that I produced in materials such as silver and brass, and also decorated the brooches with diamonds, a layer of gold leaf and enamel paint – once again renegotiating the form and function. The handkerchiefs that I transformed and

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[65] According to Wikipedia, a handkerchief is also called a "handkercher or hanky … a form of a kerchief, typically a hemmed square of thin fabric that can be carried in the pocket or purse, and which is intended for personal hygiene purposes such as wiping one's hands or face, or blowing one's nose. A handkerchief is also sometimes used as a purely decorative accessory in a suit pocket" (Sv, 'handkerchief').

interpreted in my own stylistic approach are displayed on a men's blazer. The formal blazers signify Western cultural norms of elitism. By displaying the handkerchiefs as interpreted in an 'African aesthetic style' on a prominent Western background, I make reference to forms of hybridity that might exist in contemporary jewellery practices.

Figure 30: Idané Burger, Pocket Brooches (2010). Silver, brass, gold leaf, enamel paint. Digital Photograph.

The series of pipes in Figure 31, displayed in Plexi-glass cases, has a prominent relation to Western art galleries, as discussed in Chapter 2 with respect to the *ART/artifact* exhibition. The Plexi-glass showcases as well as the attachment of the chain and the object (pipe) may alter or facilitate a renegotiation of the object on the viewer's part. Some of these pipes that are displayed in the showcases as neckpieces are also presented in the collection of objects that are displayed on the stands. The different contexts that I use to display the pipes draw on the plurality, open-endedness and divergent readings of African material culture within the specific contexts in which it is framed.

Figure 31: Idané Burger, Pendants/Objects (2011). Found objects (pipes), silver, 9ct yellow gold, brass, fresh water pearls, sea water pearls, black diamonds, cotton thread, enamel paint, gold leaf. Digital Photograph.

In the last series of my practical work I look at the convergence of African material culture in colonial, commercialist and contemporary discourses. This series consists of six neckpieces. I use wooden and ivory carved elephants, bought at curio shops and integrate them into my neckpieces, which situates the curio objects in a different context. The reading of these curio objects, when included in the neckpieces, contradicts their meaning in the previous display – as they were formerly one of many similar objects on display in the curio shop. The curio objects as seen in these neckpieces (Figures 32 and 33) are recontextualised, not only in a new framework, but also integrated into the design and sometimes concealed with paint or enfolded in cotton thread, as a 'one-of-a-kind' design.

Figures 32: Idané Burger, Neckpiece (2012). Wood, bamboo coral, ivory carved elephants, copper, cotton thread, enamel paint. Digital Photograph.

Figure 33: Idané Burger, Neckpiece (2012). Fresh water pearls, carved ivory, wood, silver. Digital Photograph.

The neckpiece, shown in Figure 34, is a representation of a traditional string of graded pearls. The pearls in this piece are replaced by wooden carved elephants. Through this neckpiece I comment on how contemporary jewellery practices question and challenge value systems by disrupting the traditional hierarchy of materials, and this stresses the extent to which symbolic and sentimental value contribute to the viewer's experience of the work. Astfalck comments on the evaluation and transformation of value systems through materials in contemporary jewellery:

> Human life itself is organised by behaviour and cognition, it is already infused by values systems and worldviews at the point where it is transformed into an artistic structure. Art then, in my way of thinking, is the transformation of this pre-organised material into a new system and in doing so marks new values (2005:23).

Figure 34: Idané Burger, Neckpiece (2012). Ebony carved elephants, silk thread, magnetic clasp, enamel paint. Digital Photograph.

Through the hybridisation and assimilation of cultural and social styles, the production techniques and the materials I use, as well as display practices, my interpretations of African

material culture can be regarded as a hybrid process. My association with 'dialogic jewellery' and the relationship it has to hybridity and liminality have become evident in my discussion of the readings and transformations that African material culture undergoes in the third space. An 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery is therefore entrenched in a process of dialogic interchange between the producer, viewer and the context in which the work is displayed. Den Betsen states in *On Jewellery: A Compendium of International Contemporary Art Jewellery* that "we know how to read jewellery because jewellery plays a role in our personal lives and society. Jewellery conveys meanings and incites readings" (2011: 14). Den Besten further explains that the relationship that contemporary jewellery has with the wearer or the viewer is "less directive than was the case around 1970. In 2011, it is not about 'having to agree with it' but rather 'having to connect with it'" (2011: 61). The connection and relationship the viewer has to contemporary jewellery practices, which I specifically investigated through my practical work, reveal the complex process of layering African material culture, which requires attentive reading. The meaning and content of the work are largely controlled by the producer, but also partially influenced, constructed and renegotiated by the viewer.

4.4 Conclusion

My investigation of the dialogic interrelationship implicit in the idea of an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery practices, as situated in a postmodern framework, emphasises the playful reading of the work and the relation between the producer, the viewer and the context in which 'dialogic jewellery' is continuously re-evaluated and framed. My exploration of dialogic jewellery shows that it requires and invites collaboration with the viewer. The dialogic interchange that is required in order to understand 'dialogic jewellery' expects the viewer to analyse African material culture as manifested through materials and the functionality of the work, as well as discourses such as commodification and tourist art practices.

The interpretations and representations of an 'African aesthetic style' comment on the overlap of boundaries that are fused into a complex relationship expressed visually in some contemporary jewellery practices. The equally important role of the artist and the viewer, which can also be seen as anti-hierarchical, comes into play when identifying the role, significance and reading of the work. Kester explains that such a relationship and collaboration between the artist and the viewer creates "an open space where individuals can

break free from pre-existing roles and obligations, reacting and interacting in a new and unforeseeable way" (2004: 6).

The extent to which the viewer can engage in the dialogue when viewing dialogic jewellery requires, to use Astfalck words, a content-based inquiry rather than a material-based approach. The materials and techniques that some artists apply in their work might not be so evident in conveying the significance of the work, as the content of the work is largely subjected to social context. Liesbeth den Besten also explains how contemporary jewellery entails more than just a process of viewing the work; contemporary jewellery is directed towards a reading and analysis of materials and conceptual value. "We are living in a culture in which the narrative is omnipresent and jewellery is treated in terms of material, style and concept, not in terms of the processes of viewing and interpreting" (2006 [Online]).

It is important to take note that the dialogue that I draw on this chapter is not a completely unrestricted form of dialogue, as the meaning and interpretation of the work is dependent on collaboration and conversation between the viewer and producer. The interpretation of an 'African aesthetic style' in contemporary jewellery as evinced in my own work, is situated in a liminal space that proclaims the heterogeneous character and open-endedness of the work and the processes of dialogic interrelationships. I find Cheung's summary of contemporary jewellery and its characteristics relevant to conclude my discussion:

> All jewellery has in common … the endless capacity to hold personal, unique meaning for the wearer, eventually defining the piece beyond its initial design and conception. By wearing, owning and interacting with jewellery, we breathe new life into it. We activate it and set it on a life-long journey to collect and absorb its surroundings (2005:12).

CONCLUSION

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue (Bakhtin 1981: 276).

My investigation of dialogic interrelationships in which African material culture is engaged is largely shaped by the discourses that have a remarkable bearing on the collection, exhibition and commodification of African material culture. I examined the limitations of dialogue, as well as the confines of perceptions within which African material culture is constructed, presented and framed. My investigation of African cultural objects in this thesis is informed and preceded by the tensions that are found in the dichotomous structures of colonial discourses, imposed through stereotypical representations of the trope of 'Africanness', as well as through the commodification of African cultural objects.

Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism was central to my own enquiry into processes of dialogic interaction that are manifested in contemporary jewellery design. I argue that the notion of an 'African aesthetic style' that can be traced in contemporary jewellery practices insists on the participation of the viewer and the producer in terms of how meaning is discursively sustained between them. The viewer and producer's negotiation and diverse interpretation of African material culture in a contemporary jewellery framework results in a contextualised social interaction.

I have drawn on my own practical work to show how social and cultural discourses inform my interpretation of, and engagement with, African material culture. As a form of 'dialogic jewellery', my practical work aims to renegotiate the complex and loaded interaction of both Western and African discourses on African material culture. The characteristics that underscore the idea of an 'African aesthetic style' are largely visualised and perceived through dialogic interrelationships and social interaction. As I have argued, the significance and meaning of African material culture are established in the numerous dialogues that occur between the work, the producer, the different viewers and the context in which the work is presented.

Both my practical work and my writing in this thesis underscore the point of intersection where divergent discourses on what constitutes the dialogic relations of an 'African aesthetic style' converge. My work was discussed as it is necessarily entrenched in the various discourses that it comments on. I do not propose that my research is somehow separate from the complicated and convoluted discourses that it plays with, but that it reflects a liminal space that is created by various delineations or overlapping borders and definitions. As such, I do not propose that jewellery design (or other forms of visual communication) can be a way to completely distance oneself from the discourses that one questions, but it rather provides a site of dialogue where various (sometimes conflicting) discourses come together and mark their discursive territories.

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