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# Bridging Spaces: An Ethnographic Study of Transnational African Art in Atlanta

by

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Under the Direction of Emanuela Guano, PhD

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ABSTRACT

Transnational routes of exchange include the flow of materials often embedded within a range of social relations and cultural processes. This research examines the representation and circulation of art and artifacts from parts of Africa within Atlanta, a major metropolis in Georgia, United States. Using ethnographic research methods, I investigate cultures of patronage, acquisition, curation, and exhibition of African art within select art organizations in Atlanta, using a small-scale African art gallery as a case study. The study reveals the complex social dynamics and negotiations surrounding engagements with transnational African art across institutional contexts in Atlanta. My findings also show how institutions of art can serve as contact zones facilitating dynamic cultural exchange and communal belonging between diverse patrons connected by their interests in African art. Core outcomes relate to identity performance and the affective, decolonial potential of institutions mediating the transnational flow and circulation of African art.

INDEX WORDS: Transnationalism, Consumption, African Art, Material Culture, Anthropology of Art, Museology

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## DEDICATION

To family and friends for their love and unwavering support, to advisors who guide and tenderly encourage, to strangers who welcomed me with open arms, to all the places I call home, and God who constantly sheds His light on my path.

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I am grateful for the kindness of strangers who were forthcoming and willing to participate in this research. Anja and Jumbe Sebunya of aKAZI, thank you for welcoming me into the beautiful space you have created and for sharing what you love about Africa through art and community. I thank all my research participants for the brilliant encounters, for sharing your experiences, and for gracefully indulging my wide-eyed curiosity. I am grateful for the opportunity

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*I thank God, the source of all life and creativity,*

*He makes everything beautiful in its time.*

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

"Objects, frozen in time and taken out of context." This was the thought running through my mind as I walked through the softly lit corridors housing the African art collection of a major art museum in Atlanta. The year is 2022 and I am thousands of miles away from home contemplating issues of identity, cultural representations, and translations of culture through art. In my investigation into how African cultures and identities are represented through art within a diasporic setting, I visited art institutions within Atlanta that house African arts and objects. These institutions were highly varied in scale and purpose; they ranged from independently owned, community-based galleries, to a large-scale cathedral-like museum. One was located within a university and many others were local commercial stores selling a range of cultural objects and artifacts.

My first visit was to the High Museum of Art, one of the leading art institutions in Atlanta and the Southeastern part of the United States. I was intrigued, first at the sheer scale of the building, and then at the rich and varied artworks in their collection. Like a flaneur experiencing a new space, I meandered through the flight of stairs and wandered along the different wings housing geographically categorized art pieces. The African art section was on the topmost floor, flanked by adjoining walls displaying African American and Folk art. It was an impressive collection, and I was able to make out a few contemporary pieces; however, many of the artworks on display were traditional sculptures attributed to nameless artists with tribal affiliations. This made me start contemplating contested histories of African art collections in Western museums including issues of authorship and provenance and tying this to contemporary representational practices in museums and galleries across Atlanta.

I explored other institutions housing African arts or objects; a university museum whose African art collection was also largely traditional and historical, and a local African art store selling a broad range of objects from African print fabrics to masks, pieces of jewelry, and what they tagged as authentic African sourced ointments. I finally came across a gallery whose focus was to spotlight contemporary art from Africa. Called aKAZI, the gallery was established and is managed by a mixed-race couple who had lived in various parts of Africa before settling in Atlanta.[1] The gallery runs with a mission to showcase emerging African art to an American audience and to create meaningful spaces for cultural exchange. I decided to make this gallery the major site for my research, juxtaposing the collection, patronage, and social engagements with that of the High Museum. I soon discovered the many layers of networks these spaces engendered for the diverse communities within Atlanta.

As a racially diverse country, America grapples with issues of accuracy and political correctness when it comes to cultural representation. The mix of diverse cultures brings about rich but sometimes complicated forms of social engagement. Amid such diversity, minority groups or underrepresented communities often engage different media to practice or highlight their unique identities – art representation being one such medium. The city of Atlanta is considered the "Black Mecca" or in some circles, the Black Utopia of the United States. It boasts of a comparatively large Black population made up of African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and African immigrants across various socioeconomic classes. Central to this study is the history of cultural translations from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and how it links with current relations between the African diaspora and the African American communities, particularly in terms of artistic representation and engagements.

[1] The meaning of aKAZI is "artwork" … "a" stands for art and "KAZI" is a Swahili language word for work.

This research examined representations of African art, both traditional and contemporary within Atlanta. I assessed consumption, circulation, and curatorial practices and how these tied to notions of race and identity. The study examined how objects of art were conceptualized outside of the sociocultural contexts from which they emerged, and in which they were created. I investigated quotidian practices of displaying and discussing African art in Atlanta. An art institution within Atlanta with collections of African art was studied using the ethnographic research methodology. Seeing art as a form of cultural expression and art institutions as a microcosm of society, I explore themes of transnationalism, cross-cultural representation, and identity negotiation.

My use of ethnographic methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews focused on the processes surrounding the curation and display of artworks, I inquired about the considerations that go into selecting artworks to be exhibited, how the artworks were sourced and acquired, and observed how they were displayed in the galleries. I also investigated the consumption practices of patrons and the commercial aspect of running art institutions, framing my inquiry with questions such as: What do people want to see? What do they buy or consume? And how does that influence what is being presented? In certain parts of this research, particularly the literature review section, I use the word “museums” to also refer to art galleries as both institutions are involved in the circulation of images, experiences, and representations through the display of art. In my ethnography and analysis, I separate these terms by making comparative distinctions.

This introductory chapter frames the research by providing a brief background on the motivations for the research and presenting the research questions and objectives. The second chapter gives a review of relevant literature categorized thematically, providing an exposition of

previous scholarly works related to the research topic and the current state of knowledge in the field of museum anthropology and the anthropology of art. Chapter three discusses the methodological approach to the study, particularly the methods of data collection, the institutional review process, and ethical considerations. Chapter four is the ethnographic presentation; here, I narrativize the ethnographic findings, giving primacy to the perspectives of the research participants. The ethnography is structured around themes interfaced with theories, some of which were discussed in the literature review. In the concluding chapter, I delineate findings and over-arching arguments, focusing on how these ties into existing theoretical frameworks. Through my findings, I argue that art institutions like aKAZI can serve as contact zones for dynamic cross-cultural interactions, as a site for the performance of identity for Black diasporic communities and provide a sense of communal belonging for people of diverse cultures. I also briefly discuss the study's limitations and prospects for further research.

# 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Through thematic organization based on the review of relevant literature, this chapter delves into how the anthropology of art can illuminate our understanding of African art in Western collections. By reviewing previous research, I conceptually situate this research within the broader context of existing scholarship on African art, museum studies, art history, and the anthropology of art.

## 2.1 African Art, in and out of Context

Art serves as a repository of cultural ideas, beliefs, and values, and acts as a channel through which these ideas are carried across generations and societies. Referencing and defining art forms therefore necessitates encompassing a wide range of cultural practices situated within particular social and historical contexts. Describing African art in a world of fluid movements and exchanges becomes a bit of a conceptual challenge – is it African because it originates somewhere on the continent or because it is produced by someone who identifies as African? How about the cultural hybrid or the artist who appropriates symbols and motifs reminiscent of African cultures? As culture and society evolve, and as globalization intensifies, there is the need to constantly expand the definition of what art is as it relates to the producers and consumers.

African art(s) is an extremely broad category across time and space. The idea of an African identity as reflected through visual art is not absolute but flexible and the sense of a fixed and timeless depiction ought to be contested, as Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu (2011:11) stated:

> Contemporary African art includes a tissue of fascinating and productive contradictions. It denotes a field of complex artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of

rich intellectual discovery at the intersection of the shifting models of cultural, political, social, and epistemological analyses in which Africa is meaningfully interpellated.

In the context of my research, I problematize African art to mean contemporary, as well as (neo) traditional products of art, including paintings, sculptures, and crafts mostly from sub-Saharan African countries (pictured below), that are displayed and sold in transnational institutional settings like museums and galleries.

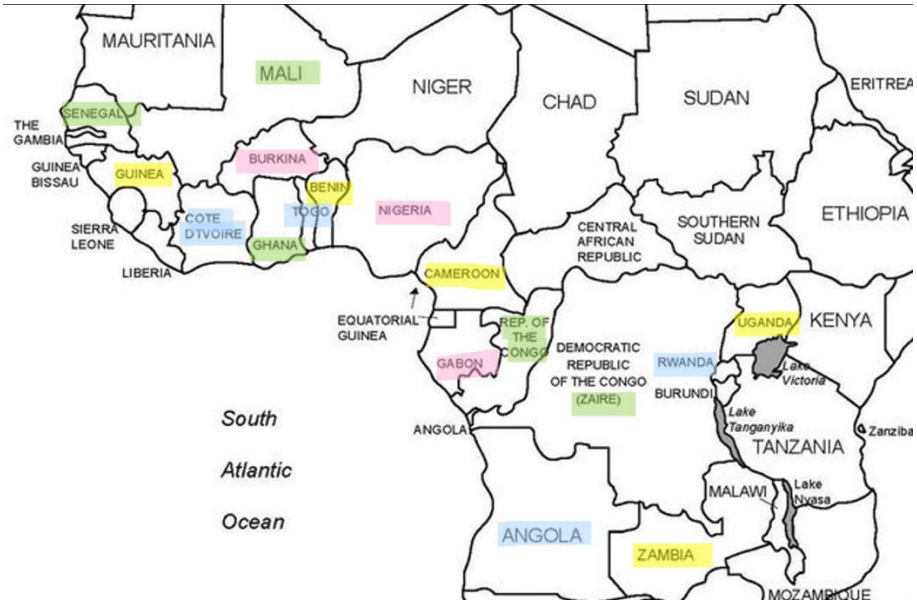


*Figure 1: Map showing select Regions of Sub-Sharan Africa*

The relationship between art and society is recursive; Ben-Amos (1989:1) argues that social practices and beliefs affect art, which, in turn, art affects social practice. The art of Africa spans a vast and varied continent, and as with other human societies, has been subject to external influence. In turn, these have resulted in changes in both form and function (Willett 1971). The study of African art, particularly by Western scholars, has historically been engaged through the lens of a generalized, homogenous Other (Willet 1971:10) or as primitive isolates (Steiner 1994:1).

The picture of abstract art forms, fetish-enchanted figures, and an artistic culture stuck in an unchanging past percolate in Western thought and imaginaries on African art (Thompson et al., 2002). Kasfir (1984:163) describes this as a "one tribe-one style" model that tends to oversimplify the inherent complexities that exist in various cultural forms of African art. For Fabian in his theory of anthropology's "denial of Coevalness," what is being studied becomes a differentiated Other that remains stable and static through space and time, as opposed to the modern, moving time of the anthropologist. This contradiction, he argued, was instrumental in the justification of colonial domination of the Others and the universalization of Western progress (Fabian 2014: xxxviii-xl). Historically, most African cultures did not have a notion of art as a separate category, but rather viewed material objects as integrated with utility, ritual, and social life. European colonists and anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries began labeling African objects, such as masks and figurines, as "primitive art", appreciating the aesthetic qualities but often removing them from cultural context (Errington 1998:3-9). In contemporary times and emerging museum practice, many of these object traditions are being reclaimed and reappropriated through decolonial practices. In essence, these collections serve a purpose for the host culture that is quite different for the members of the cultural groups and their diasporic communities.

Ideas influenced by prevailing theories are especially powerful as they impact economic and political relations between societies, according to Kasfir (1984), these dominant paradigms often go unquestioned. Historically, social evolutionary viewpoints that argued that all societies evolved in stages served as justification for the inequitable power dynamics observed in the acquisition, distribution, and display of African art in the colonial period (Bouquet 2012:64). Some of these ideas are still in existence and continue to influence the perception of African Art in the Western imagination (Stoller 2003). By deconstructing the idea of cultural archetypes and the

theory of cultural diffusionism, that is, the spread of cultural systems and materials within societies, Steiner argues for an extension of the theory to include processes and not just systems of social change (Steiner 1994:1).

Processes of social change influenced by cross-cultural contacts have continued to have an impact on contemporary African art, particularly in societies outside the source community; the effects of these can be seen in the stylistic choice, artistic media, and meanings ascribed to works of art. Of particular interest are emerging debates on the role of art and art institutions in the formation of transnational and diasporic identities. Brown (2003) describes the nexus formed between Western museums, their collections, and the source communities from which they emerge, presenting the museum as a field site or contact zone for consultation and collaboration. The following section examines the historical role of museums in cultural representation and as a space for negotiating identity.

## 2.2 The De- and Re-territorialization of African Art in the North Atlantic

From the trade of artifacts along the Silk Road to the transfer of artisanal expertise among ancient communities, art has always traveled beyond its site of production, as forms of cultural and economic exchange. As people move, ideas and objects circulate with them. African art as an element of material culture becomes an object circulated in transnational trade. Sculptures, paintings, weavings, woodwork, bead-making, and so on are often traded aspects of the creative enterprise. Steiner (1994:20) gives a detailed analysis of the commercial system of African art, from displays in stalls and open markets, where tourists value the “authentic” experience of the vibrant marketplace, to galleries, storehouses, and private vendors.

Cultural objects from other societies are often considered highly valuable and could serve as a means of class performance on an individual or national scale. For instance, in the asymmetrical power relations between colonized cultures and their colonizers, cultural artifacts were often exploitatively collected from colonized countries as a part of nationalist agendas and in the establishment of empire (Coombes 1994:2). These objects, housed in private and public collections, were categorized as ethnographic, cultural, or art objects. Cross-cultural interactions are mediated by perceptions people have about one another, which could be stereotypical and incomplete (Bochner 1982:18). African art in Western imaginaries has been perceived and represented with clichéd ideas such as being stuck in a primitive past. Many of the early collections of African art in foreign galleries were exhibited to promote hegemonic and nationalist ideals (Bouquet 2012:72; Osborn, Jules-Rosette, & Bennetta 2020).

Collections of African art in the West during the pre-colonial and colonial eras were imbued with promoting diverse elements of political, economic, and ideological agendas. Pre-colonial collections served to advance scientific categorizations of race and show comparative advancements on a national level. During the colonial era, the occupation of African territories and lands gave way to forceful acquisitions of material artifacts in several instances (Clifford 1988). One cogent example was the British punitive expedition of the Benin Empire in 1897 during which a vast quantity of "art" was looted from the community including bronze plaques, ivory carvings, and wooden sculptures (Ratté 1972:2). These objects were taken from their cultural context to be exhibited in Western museums and galleries or private collections. In the process, they gained new meanings and functionalities. Clifford (1988) argues that non-Western objects removed from their cultural contexts during colonialism took on new meanings as they entered the Western system of art and were designated as "art objects" where previously they were used mostly

for ceremonial purposes and were involved in social functions beyond their aesthetic value. These objects enter changing systems of value based on the time and the social context within which they circulate.

During the colonial occupation of African nations, there was also increasing interest and curiosity in cultural materials from colonies giving rise to disciplines like anthropology and ethnology (Ratté 1972:2-4; Clifford 1988:220). Understanding the peculiarity of cultures considered as the 'other' served as the *raison d'être* of social research, much of which was unfortunately geared towards the justification of the colonial enterprise. This othering of colonized cultures persisted into several aspects of life and was reflected not only in people's understanding and expectation of foreign cultures but also in the forms of presentation and interpretation given to the various forms of material cultures collected from these areas. As Said (1979) explains through what he terms "orientalism," the views and ideas constructed by the "West" about the "East" constitute forms of discourse, perceptions, engagements, and control. The defining spirit of this era trickled down to acquisition and curatorial practices; it also influenced prevailing perceptions of what is seen as the archetypal or authentic forms of African art.

Apart from the colonial influence, Clifford (1988) argues that the rise of modernism gave way to increased interest, appreciation, and collection of African art in Europe and the United States. African art objects and design techniques were infused and appropriated into modern art movements like Cubism, Fauvism, and abstract expressionism; Western artists like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Georges Braque were inspired by the "African aesthetic" (Alfert 1972:387). Cohen (2020:190) talks about Black art as a heuristic to understand the "transcontinental history of African and diaspora modernisms." For instance, during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to 1930s, Black art helped establish new forms of identity for African American artists who

referenced African aesthetic traditions through their art; Black social thinkers like Alain Locke also collected and exhibited African art objects to recontextualize existing representational practices (Cohen 2020:94).

In contemporary times, many of the perceptions and motivations discussed persist. Osborn *et.al* (2020) reflect on the need to rethink the role and future of museums in modern societies, especially as it relates to the collection of art in diasporic settings. Patterns of representations and circulations of African art have been contested and changed in postcolonial cultures by and among the Black community in the West through emerging scholarly, artistic, and exhibition practices. Digital media and technologies have contributed to the perceptions and circulations of African art on a global scale. Africans and African diasporas alike can easily connect, share, and collaborate through multimedia platforms; emerging technologies have also contributed to a more global understanding and appreciation of African art.

### 2.3 Transnational African Art: Colonial and Postcolonial Reflections

"Contemporary art is art pre-occupied with being within its time."
-Terry Smith (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2011:12)

The forms, meanings, and functions of arts from Africa have varied through the years owing to social changes such as the effects of globalization, technology, migration, change, and colonialism. Historically, traditional African arts were intricately linked to spiritual practices like rites, rituals, and initiations or for political purposes such as coronations, depictions of the rulers, and shows of prestige. These artworks were mostly communally owned and produced. African art's functional and symbolic role became increasingly commodified with new categories of art coming into existence in the colonial and post-colonial era. These works were grounded in a combination of African and European expressive traditions.

Contemporary African Art although hard to periodize, can be said to have started, some argue, as a response to colonialism and European modernity in the late 20th century. Art began to serve as a means of personal expression or aesthetic display. Some contemporary African artists, despite the global influence, believe that the content of their artworks should show direct connections to their African heritage and experience, that is, the belief that art specific to a region ought to depict cultural values and concepts, some artists thereby infuse local materials, histories, and traditions in their art (McNaughton P.R. and Pelrine, D. 2014). Many do not however subscribe to this ideology and "march towards a post-historical paradigm where traditional styles no longer designate the aesthetic coordinates of artistic tradition (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2011:12)." Therefore, the historical trajectory of African arts should not be seen as rigid a compartmentalization, places and periods overlap, and continue to do so.

African art has a rich history that has captivated collectors, museums, and art enthusiasts around the world. The intricate aesthetics, powerful symbolism, and unique cultural significance of these artworks have contributed to their widespread appreciation. Museums and private collectors in Europe and the United States have amassed extensive African art collections, which have played a vital role in shaping public understanding, appreciation, and perception of African culture. However, the history of the acquisition of these collections is fraught with complex and controversial issues that continue to be debated today. The expansion of European art collections featuring African works can be traced back to the era of European colonialism (Bouquet 2012:65), with the US entering this market in the late 19th century. During this period, museums became sites for the display of nationalistic dominance, they served as symbols of colonial power, and the perceived superiority of Western culture (Ames 1992:22).

The displacement and de-deification of these objects, which include a diverse range of items such as reliquaries, statues, masks, and sculptures, some of which were used in ceremonial rites, from their original context has had profound consequences on African cultures and the understanding of their arts. The loss of these objects has deprived local communities of their cultural heritage, this is a particularly poignant argument in the call for repatriation, and the fragmented nature of these collections has made it difficult for scholars to study African arts in their full context (Adams 1989:55). In addition, some of the displays of African art forms in European and American museums have often perpetuated stereotypes and misconceptions about African cultures.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the problematic history surrounding African art collections in Europe and the United States. Some museums are now attempting to grapple with their colonial legacy through a myriad of policies and interventions some of which include the repatriation of artworks to their countries of origin, collaborative exhibitions, digital archiving, and various forms of cultural exchanges, to create more inclusive and accurate representations of African art. Small-scale art galleries are also engaged in the structuring of new forms of knowledge and narratives. The increasing prominence of contemporary African artists on the global art scene has also helped to challenge outdated stereotypes and bring new perspectives to the appreciation of African culture and artistic traditions. This research spotlights localized attempts to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the vast artistic traditions of Africa within Western culture.

## 2.4 Museums and Galleries as Sites of Convergence and Contestation

> "Museums sustain the discourses and preserve the environments for pursuing the pertinent debates of our times."

– Bennetta Jules-Rosette[2]

Museums and art galleries are representational spaces developed to curate experiences. The International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2019) defines a museum as:

> A nonprofit making, permanent institution in the service of society that research, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.

Art galleries are like museums in their curatorial function, but they tend to differ in scale, modalities of display, and institutional or commercial focus.

Based on ethnographic observations of museums of African art, Jules-Rosette, B. (2020: 14-15) proposed five levels of "transformational museum modes." First is the curiosity cabinet and private collections, then the small gallery space, the modernist museum, the post-modern museum, and lastly, the virtual museum. Museum collections and how they are used frame the museum's identity, and sometimes these categories overlap. Using this classificatory system, aKAZI as a core site of my research falls under the small gallery space where "items are chosen by taste and aesthetic categories; the audience usually consists of collectors, aficionados, artists, and the larger public, and exhibits are often unified by themes" (Jules-Rosette. B 2020: 15). As the other ethnographic site of this project, the High Museum overlaps the last three nodes, catering to "the general public, art enthusiasts, and tourists; collections and acquisitions are extensive, and

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[2] Jules-Rosette, B. (2020). Curatorial Networks and Museum Culture: Objects and evidence in museums of African art. *Museum Anthropology*, *43*(1), 14–28. https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12215

exhibits are structured based on institutional affordances and curatorial themes" (Jules-Rosette. B 2020:15). Online displays and virtual spaces add an interesting layer to contemporary art curation and consumption, the nodes become more intertwined and reproduced to wider audiences, bridging cultural and geographical borders.

This research engaged both the museum and gallery space in understanding the representations (what is being displayed), presentations (how it is displayed), and engagements with transnational African art in Atlanta. The use of the word "museum" is more prominent, and I employ it to allude to galleries as well. Bennett (1995:7) describes museums as spaces of representation organized through different display structures, which frame humans as the objects of knowledge. In his analysis, Bennett alludes to Foucault's theory of heterotopias as "deeply meaningful and highly specialized places that invert and condense meaning" (Foucault & Miskowiec 1986:24). He argues that museums present an accumulation of cultural knowledge over time and can condense cultural meanings through what is being displayed; this makes them a plausible site for the (re)presentation, creation, or reinvention of cultural meaning and identities.

The authorial value and legitimacy ascribed to museums as authorities in charge of new and existing forms of knowledge, in Western societies, date back to the 15$^{th}$ to 17$^{th}$ centuries; when museums evolved from the private cabinet of curiosities and gradually opened to the public, taking on the role of providing public education (Ames 1992). Systems of classification and interpretation entrenched within the scientific principle emerged in ethnographic museums and museums became trusted custodians of things considered valuable and significant sources of knowledge for members of society (Ames 1992:21). This privilege of an 'objective' presentation of reality in museum practice not only presumes that the viewer is asocial (Handler 1993) but also neglects various

forms of hegemonic processes involved in the acquisition and display of objects. Bennett (1995:74) describes this hegemonic process as the "exhibitionary complex," that is:

> Institutions involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed to a restricted public, into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power (colonial ideology) throughout society.

Alluding to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which describes how power and dominance are exercised through ideological influences and the pursuit of consent (Gramsci 1972), Bennett argues that "insights generated through museum displays are moderated by rhetorical strategies of power" (Bennet 1995:9). Objects (and bodies) on display become vehicles for broadcasting and inscribing messages of supremacy (Bennett 1995:61). They also promote national sensibilities and pride by presenting the "other" as a category different from the citizen-viewer. Bouquet (2012) describes the museum as a theatre of the nation. Framing the audience as the object of knowledge implies giving prominence to the gaze of the observer. Considerations of who is observing and what should be observed are woven into the curatorial process, impacting the forms of knowledge and representation that are publicized.

Viewpoints on the museum according to Karp (1991) include the traditional stance of seeing the museum as a temple and a rising contemporary stance of the museum as a forum. The idea of the museum as a temple is very much like what has been described above, in that it entails the presentation of "structured samples of reality as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions" (Karp 1991:3). Museum as a forum is an emerging position where the museum becomes a place for "confrontation, experimentation, and debate" (Karp 1991:3),

Canclini (2014) also sees the museum as a critical arena and a space for engaging social and political issues. These viewpoints tie back to Foucault's concept of heterotopias, which he defined as a space where meanings can be invented or reinforced (Foucault & Miskowiec 1986:24).

Contemporary Western museums embrace this new stance, but the question of who gets to participate in the forum remains contested (Karp 1991:4). Handler (1993) further expands the purpose of a museum to include social relationships. For him, the museum is a social arena even before it is a repository of objects (Handler 1993:33). In this sense, objects mediate social relationships by projecting meanings defined through these relationships and the surrounding social/cultural context. Handler, therefore, advocates for the use of a relativist perspective and an interpretive context in the study of museum objects as opposed to a universalist view that ascribes a common set of value judgments to art (Handler 1993:34). By focusing on the social context, museums, and their objects are considered an ongoing sociopolitical process that involves negotiations of value made by curators as well as visitors based on subjective interpretations (Handler 1993:34).

The debates around non-Western arts and artifacts in Western museums are usually presented as a representational conundrum. Contemporary museums grapple with issues of accurate representation and how to accommodate alternative perspectives (Karp 1991:4). The existence of "multiple gazes" and the multiplicity of meanings from the cultures represented tends to lend to this complication; there are also concerns about whether to privilege context over the object (Karp 1991:12). Museums are constantly devising new ways to address these concerns, be it through repatriation, collaborative curation, or rethinking the contested histories of their collections. This is often a concern in what is called "the encyclopedic museum," museums that are dedicated to presenting a representative sample of the world's cultures objectively, the High

Museum falls into this category. Cuno (2011) argues that beyond the imperialist tendencies, these spaces can be beneficial in presenting the diversity of the world's cultures through art as humanity's common heritage, promoting tolerance and understanding in an increasingly globalized world and while this could be true, objectivity in cultural representation seems to be an unreachable myth.

## 2.5 A Mirrored Encounter: Culture and Identity in Representational Spaces

As representational spaces, art institutions have historically evolved to serve distinct functions. Ames (1992) discusses how the Renaissance period gave way to a democratization of access to museums from previously elitist ownership and admission. The reason for this was the belief that museums could serve to educate the public in a highly effective way. Representing "the other" and its impact on the construction of identity and perceptions has always been a foundational issue in museums and other art institutions. History is never one-sided, and it is important to examine the many complex and multifaceted sides of the story of museum representations, particularly in terms of evolving concepts like agency and collaboration.

In addition to the educational function, art museums and galleries could also take on a social function; as Handler (1993) argues, museums mediate social relationships by presenting objects to which meanings can be ascribed through social engagement. In this sense, the museum becomes a social place with human reactions, implications, and relationships. It is therefore a valid point of entry into understanding transnational relations and social engagement patterns. This social space is not neutral, as patterns are ingrained in the culture, architecture, and spatial settings peculiar to the organization; participants are therefore expected to tune their behavior towards these expectations and modify their engagements based on what is presented. Pratt (1991:34)

describes this as a contact zone where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”

Given some of the contested origins of African art collections in Western societies, it is important to engage with and study the perspectives of contemporary actors in the African art world and the museum space. Their relations to existing, canonical structures of museum representations and their negotiations in terms of agency, re-narrativizing perceptions, and presenting forward-looking viewpoints form the major focus of this ethnography. By listening to the experiences of the human actors and observing their relations to the exhibited objects, this research aims to contribute to ground-up studies of art institutions, particularly in transnational representations.

## 2.6 Art and Identity: Negotiations between Homeland and Diaspora Identities

Art has long been a potent tool for shaping and expressing individual and collective identities. For diaspora communities, who must often navigate complex relationships between their homeland and host countries, art becomes one way to negotiate and reconcile the multiplicity of identities. Art plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting the experiences of diaspora communities, it can serve as a bridge between homeland and host societies, foster a sense of belonging, and facilitate cross-cultural dialogue (Smith, DeMeo & Widmann 2011:186-197). Art within diaspora communities preserves and transmits cultural heritage. In negotiating identity in diverse cultural climes, art can serve as a tangible reminder of one's roots.

Through various artistic forms, such as painting, sculpture, music, dance, and literature, diaspora artists, art institutions and communities can capture and share the essence of their homeland culture, ensuring its continued relevance and vitality within their adopted countries. Art

in diaspora communities can also catalyze cross-cultural dialogue and understanding (Rubin et al., 2001). By presenting their experiences and perspectives through artistic expression, audiences are invited to engage in a conversation that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. Through the creation and consumption of art, Black diaspora communities can preserve and transmit their cultural heritage, negotiate their identities, engage in cross-cultural dialogue, and challenge stereotypes and misconceptions. [OBJ]

In understanding the process of negotiating identities, it is important to engage with the perspectives and experiences of Black communities in North America. Distinct and yet like the social category of Black immigrants, Black Americans constitute major patrons of African art. Embracing a culture that is considered lost or foreign yet peculiar to their communal and group history often stands as a motive. Hall (1990:111) describes identity as a flux, a social production, and as constituted within representation. According to him, identity is an unspoken presence among African diaspora communities, the practice of which lay not only in its rediscovery but in its production and visages of representation (Hall 1990:111 -116).

Among Black Americans, art has often been used to address a difficult and contested history and to draw out narratives of decolonization using symbolic and figurative motives. African American artists like Romare Bearden (1911-1988), Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000), and Bisa Butler (born 1973) have used their art to explore themes of identity, community, and resilience in African American history and cultural experience. Many African immigrant artists in the contemporary art scene also draw on African cultural motives in their art and explore the relationship between Africa and the diaspora.

In this study, I explore the seminal and multifaceted question of what Africa means to Black American communities. The role of art in establishing connections and in creating or

sustaining links to imagined communities and identities is noteworthy. Hall (1990:117) references Anderson (1983) uses the notion of imagined communities to explain how transnational communities can derive figurative and real value from the performance of identity that ties them to a root culture, I argue that art serves as a potent way of promoting these imaginaries. Products of art can be consumed experientially and materially. The experiential aspect can serve to educate and establish both real, perceived, or aspirational identities; the material forms of consumption can function as a performance of identity as Goffman (1990) posits the metaphorical use of "props" in social settings to convey desired impressions. Material consumption of art could also be a form of class performance where engagements with certain types of art forms over others could signify the ownership or accumulation of social/cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). This research explored the extent to which art communities and art production are viable means of seeking out this sense of identity.

## 2.7 African Art and Ideas of Authenticity

In the trade and consumption of what is traditionally perceived as African art, questions of authenticity are primary concerns, with consumers always on the lookout for fake and compromised products. Jung (2014:53) uses the term *mente* to describe commodities that are "fake, inauthentic, unoriginal, or untrustworthy," making it difficult for consumers to tell which is which. In his biography on the artist J.S.G. Boggs, Weschler (2000) wondered why it was often unsettling for people to think primarily of art as a commodity, perhaps because of its inalienable ties to the artist and because, unlike money, the value of art is not inherently agreed on. With the growth of post-industrialist and capitalist economies, art has become increasingly commodified and produced within mass culture. Questions on reproduction, quality, originality, and authenticity

become more concerning. There is also the notion that the proliferation of duplicates through easier mass replication prompted by the technologies of the modern era could impact the essence and authenticity of an artwork (Benjamin & Zohn 2018).

Kasfir (1992) explores authenticity issues in African art as it undergoes transnational exchange; and how it operates as a commodity and as an aesthetic act. She asks the question, "Who creates meaning for African art? And who or what determines its cultural authenticity? She traced her analysis back to the theoretical ideas that have historically pervaded the art industry, among Western "connoisseurs" and scholars of culture. The belief in the primacy of traditional society and, thus, its ideas and forms as reflected through the art produced has remained dominant. Discussions of cultural appropriation have often described a lack of authenticity as fake, forged, or imitating an "original form." This original form is defined by existing thoughts that equate authenticity to art forms produced before European colonization within isolated, tightly knit communities, giving rise to what William Fagg calls "tribality" that is, community-specific aesthetic style (Kasfir 1992: 41). The idea of art borne out of a timeless past has remained prevalent regardless of social changes in African societies. Kasfir notes that Western museums and art institutions have held on to these ideas of authenticity, giving little cognizance to what came after the colonial era.

Negotiations between indigenous artists, traders, collectors, and art museums are also another point of analysis. Local artists from whom these artworks are sourced often conform to these expectations of what is authentic and fashion their work in like manner. Cornet (1975) mentioned two criteria for differentiating authentic art from fake ones; he refers to African art as traditional art, which already posits a particular requirement. Those interested in this variant of art must know how to recognize inauthentic traditional art. The criteria for making this judgment

include “the extent to which it conforms to the characteristic style element of a particular tribe and the evidence of use” (Cornet 1975: 52). To achieve this, some artists engage in artificially aging their art to give it an appearance of use. Kasfir also identifies how artists try to imitate tribal art styles and designs to conform to presumed ideas of authenticity.

Ideas of exoticness and the primitive other still exist in the Western conceptualization of African art. The art institutions visited for this research all had major pieces that embodied this idea of authenticity, even though most were reproductions and imitations. The art of Africa is also believed to serve metaphysical and symbolic functions, and so individual artists are not often recognized. The nameless artist phenomenon, according to Kasfir, is a precondition to authenticity; it allows for the objects to be reinvented by collectors to fit prevailing intellectual ideas and might even become a fetish through the process of naming, categorizing, and presenting the works to an audience of a different culture (Kasfir 1992: 44).

# 3 METHODS

## 3.1 Research Design

This research was conducted using standard ethnographic methods, specifically in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Ethnography involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and collecting data to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:1). LeCompte (2010:15) defines ethnography as a systematic approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities and institutions. This research aims to identify emerging themes in the engagement practices of patrons with varying social identities, paying particular attention to those of African immigrants and Black Americans.

The study is grounded in the interpretive framework that emphasizes meaning making and understanding systems of symbols within cultures. The framework applies to this study because it focuses on generating meanings that originate from the research field. Inductive design, which is by nature exploratory, involves the search for patterns from observation and the development of theories to explain those patterns (Bernard 2011:7). Within this framework, emphasis is put on the people's perspectives in the research setting (LeCompte 2010:15). I employ the inductive and exploratory ethnographic approach in this study to build culturally valid theories that can be applied locally or elsewhere (LeCompte 2010:15).

The research was carried out majorly at aKAZI Gallery, with a bit of supporting data collected from the High Museum of Art. These sites were selected through non-probability purposive sampling techniques (Bernard 2011:145) based on the research objectives and the intensive nature of the study. Another motive for the sample and case selection is the project's

duration; for a limited-time-bound research project, it was not feasible to carry out the study on a large scale, that is, within more art organizations in Atlanta.

Participant observation involves collecting and recording information and explicitly identifying what is happening within the social setting (Musante, 2014). Participant observation was conducted at the galleries through the active participant-observer technique (Johnson, Avenarius & Weatherford 2006:111-134). In line with this, I attended events and exhibitions at aKAZI gallery to gain insight into the workings of the institution and to develop rapport with the study participants (Musante 2014:253). This helped me provide insight into the process of displaying, representing, and consuming African art. The behavior of gallery patrons was also observed; especially as it relates to identity and consumptive practices. Particular attention was given to the demographics of visitors and patrons of the gallery. Engaging in participant observation also gave me the chance to meet potential interviewees.

I carried out semi-structured and informal interviews in addition to the participant observation. Interviews are used in ethnography to investigate the cognitive and emotional saliency of social and cultural models of behavior (Levy et al. 2014: 297). As this study seeks to understand individual perspectives, discursive practices, and contextual meanings, interviews helped generate valuable data. Semi-structured interviews were employed by combining researcher and respondent-directed questions and probes (Levy et al. 2014:300); an interview guide was designed, but the opportunity was also given to respondents to direct the conversation as needed. Interview participants were chosen based on non-probability sampling techniques, particularly the snowball method (Bernard 2011:145).

I interviewed the owners and curators of aKAZI gallery as well as guests, collaborators, and collectors of African art. In total, I formally interviewed two gallerists, a curator, and five

collectors, I had innumerable informal conversations with guests at aKAZI's events and exhibitions. These participants were selected based on their patronage, knowledge of, and involvement with African art in Atlanta. Interview questions focused on respondents' practices of discussing, patronizing, collecting, and curating African art.

I employed the snowball method where interview subjects are recruited from the suggestions of a key informant who in this case was Jumbe, the co-owner of aKAZI Gallery. "Snowball sampling is a well-known, nonprobability method of survey sample selection that is commonly used to locate hidden populations. This method relies on referrals from initially sampled respondents to other persons believed to have the characteristic of interest" (T.P. Johnson 2014). Jumbe connected me to patrons, collaborators, and collectors of African art, many of whom, in his words, were "major supporters" of the gallery, and were involved with the African art scene in Atlanta. During the interviews, I started by explaining the scope and purpose of my research and sought their consent for the interview. The interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes to an hour, and most were conducted at the homes of the participants.

### 3.2 Data Collection

Interviewees were asked about their forms of engagement with African art in aKAZI gallery and other art museums within Atlanta or the United States at large. Forms of engagements include curating, buying, selling, and general perceptions on the representation of African art in Atlanta.[3] These questions helped guide the interview; however, given the emergent nature of ethnographic research, subjects were allowed to bring up issues that they regarded as important and were asked to elaborate on them if they wished. In my observations, I examined visitor

[3] See the appendix for the interview questions.

interactions with the art on display and the forms of conversations they have. I also observed the curatorial process, visitor demographic, frequency of patronage, artworks purchased, and patterns of discourse that emerge during artist talks and visitor engagement.[4]

The duration of the data collection process lasted for about a year. The first visit I made to aKAZI Gallery and the first contact I had with the director of the gallery was in October 2022, after which I attended nearly all the events held at the gallery, held sometimes within three months intervals depending on the program schedule. Semi-structured interviews with collectors and guests at the gallery were conducted between July to October 2023. I visited the High Museum periodically by myself or with friends during which I made observations and conducted informal interviews.

### 3.3 Data Management and Analysis

The qualitative and ethnographic methodology for this research allowed for rich textual data to be generated through interviews and observation narratives. Notes were taken during and after the interviews and observations. The interviews were recorded with an audio-recording device and were deleted as soon as transcription and analysis were done. All field notes are stored in a password-protected file on my computer, which is also password-protected, and written materials will be kept safely in my personal possession.

The data collected were analyzed using thematic-content analysis, a research method where textual data is analyzed systematically to reveal major, recurring themes and categories of interest to the researcher (Haggarty 1996). Data were coded based on themes such as consumption and circulation, identity formation, politics of display and representation, discourse and perception,

[4] See the appendix for the observation guide.

and authenticity. Themes are identified and patterns analyzed through the development of new and emerging theories.

### 3.4 A Note on Positionality and Reflexivity in the Research Process

Researchers bring a complex mix of personal characteristics and theoretical approaches to the field (Musante 2014:248). A researcher's social identity, experiences, and values can impact the research process by either enhancing or limiting access to groups or forms of information; it can also influence elements in data collection or interpretation. It is therefore important to reflect on one's position with the research topic, the research setting, and the study participants.

I was born and raised in Nigeria and immigrated to the United States to attend graduate school. My interest in African art developed out of exposure to institutionalized art practices at the Ife Art School in Nigeria where I studied the cultural-historical and social commentary role of Ife Art for my bachelor's degree. I have seen how art can be used to engender social change and structure cultural values and narratives using a theoretical standpoint that interrogates the nexus between structuralism and individual agency. Now as an African immigrant studying African diasporic art, I recognize that my social identity and educational background may influence the way this research is conducted in terms of gaining easier access to participants, the nature of conversations that emerge, and the forms of interpretations given.

My personal experience with African art in different social contexts has given me a deep appreciation for how art can sometimes be used as a form of identity signifier and in building cross-cultural communities. My understanding of the role of art in society is primarily through a functionalist lens which makes me predisposed to view art and art institutions through a similar model. From my cultural history, artworks were created to fulfill social functions either religious,

ceremonial, or communal. Although there are broader uses in contemporary contexts, much of the historical visages and applications remain.

By being constantly aware of my position within the research context, I aimed to conduct fair and credible research. I did this by keeping a reflective journal, seeking feedback from my academic community and research participants, and overall, by giving room to a transparent process to gain a more nuanced and rounded understanding of the research questions. As a participant-observer embedded within the research community, I was able to draw on the values of engaged anthropological research such as collaboration, reciprocity, openness, and respect. Throughout my project design and implementation, I was committed to ethical research practice by obtaining IRB approval and informed consent from all participants, protecting identities, and practicing reflexivity about my positionality.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Georgia State University to ensure it meets ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Informed consent, which according to the American Anthropological Association (AAA) should be viewed as an ongoing and dynamic process, will be obtained from all participants, through a form signed before conducting observations or interviews.

Identifying details about the participants were anonymized in field notes, transcripts, and this publication. Participants were informed of their right to end their participation at any time or withdraw consent after the fact. Sensitive information revealed during the research remains confidential. As an ethnographer, I reflected on the impact of some of my subjectivities on the field throughout the research process. By building rapport and participating in shared dialogue, I

strove to mitigate forms of power dynamics that might be present in studying “up” at institutions of art – a sense of engaging research fields and participants that could have higher cultural capital and forms of knowledge. This project supports and upholds the ethical imperative for anthropologists to contribute insights that enhance human dignity and integrity through engaged methods.

# 4 ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents a narrative of the interview and observation data collected over a year-long period, primarily at aKAZI gallery from October 2022 to October 2023. The voices and views of the research participants together with observations at the research sites are presented in a near-chronological format, together with a discursive analysis of emerging themes drawn from the literature reviewed. Theories and arguments are then posited from these analyses to contribute to broader conversations within the fields of museum anthropology and the anthropology of art.

## 4.1 Framing Africa: The African Art Collection at The High Museum of Art (a brief overview)

In this section, I provide a very brief overview of the African art section at the High Museum of Art, one of the largest museums for visual arts in the Southeastern United States, located in Midtown Atlanta. My ethnography focuses on a smaller African art gallery in downtown Atlanta; however, I make occasional references and comparisons to the scale, collection, and visitor dynamics at the High Museum with what is obtainable at my main ethnographic site. Some of my respondents also referred to the High Museum when discussing their perceptions and engagements with African art in Atlanta.

The High Museum was the very first major art institution I visited when I arrived in the United States. I was impressed by how large and prominent it was. The museum stood like a quiet edifice alongside the bustling Midtown cityscape. Like a sanctuary, the museum invites you into an awesome, almost intimidating space. I visited alone and appreciated that I had all the time to myself to carefully go through the numerous sections and collections at the museum. I soon got tired and decided that I would need more than a day to see it all.

Entering the museum, I was led into an expansive lobby with black barricades leading toward the front desk. Signs of “Please wait here” and “Express line for members” were placed strategically at the entrance. I showed an attendant my ticket and proceeded to start my solo tour. I intentionally did not ask for any map or guide and decided to flaneur my way around. I passed through the lobby and through a bridge that connects you to the central exhibition part of the gallery. I made my way through a flight of about five stairs, passing through nooks and bridges that bordered different parts of the museum. The white spiral stairs peeked into each section. The Museum houses collections ranging from European landscape art and portraitures to sculptured African pieces, Pop art, American art, and a wide selection of Modern and Contemporary art.

The African Art section at the High Museum of Art is located on the topmost floor. Hinged between the African American and the folk-art sections, it is painted in soft, earthy hues and you move in between these spaces as if you were moving between distinct times and periods. It is an interesting observation on structural deliberateness in curatorial practice, and the way space can be organized in museum settings to engender the flow of certain narratives. The section boasts of impressive and diverse artworks collected from ancient to contemporary times, with more “traditional art forms” such as figurines, sculptures, ceramics, and textiles – handcrafted objects, being put on permanent display. There were only a few contemporary pieces on view as well, like the work of the Ghanaian-born artist, El Anatsui, who interrogates colonial influence on African societies through his art.

*Figure 2: Displayed Objects in the African art section of the High Museum of Art. Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, 2022*

*Figure 3: Taago, El Anatsui, aluminum, and copper wire, 2004, Ghana. Photo from the High Museum of Art's Digital collection.*

On one of my visits, I approached and interviewed a few people I saw walking through the African art section of the museum to test my hypothesis of consumption as a performance of identity either racial, cultural, or economic. The presence of people from diverse social classifications at the Museum made me reflect on the possibility of their participation being a form of meta-consumption, that is, the idea of belonging to aspects of legitimate culture through participation in activities that could serve as pointers to the cultural or social capital (Shankar,

2006:293-317). An elderly Black couple spoke to me about their fascination with the artworks on display, the man, in his late 60s, commented on how the art gave him more insight into his roots and origin “The African art collection is interesting and intriguing. It tells me a lot about Africa and my roots, are you from Africa?” he asked, “do you recognize any pieces from your country?” Art consumption can be socially constructed, and aesthetic taste can be a function of racial identity, class, or cultural performance. I explore these themes and more through my ethnographic research at aKAZI gallery.

*Figure 4: Visitors at the African art section of the High Museum of Art. Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, 2022*

## 4.2 Out of Africa: Culture and Exhibitory Practices in aKAZI Gallery

### *4.2.1 Museums as Process: Repurposing Space and Re-contextualizing Objects*

On a warm and clear Thursday morning in October 2022, after booking a viewing appointment online, I made my way to a Gallery called aKAZI, in downtown Atlanta. The gallery

lay unobtrusively near a row of similar buildings. It was surrounded by developmental building projects, an old cathedral, and modern-styled buildings on the opposite side of the road. I walked down, making sure to pay attention to signs on the buildings which could serve as pointers to my destination. I had walked a little past the gallery before realizing it must have been the building with an African design-themed flyer posted on the door. Unless you peep through the transparent windows to view the building's interior, there was no conspicuous sign indicating the gallery's location.


*Figure 5: Poster at the Gallery Entrance.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, October 2022*

I rang the doorbell and was ushered in warmly by an elderly man, in his sixties. At the entrance, Kente and Ankara fabrics were framed, hung as tapestry, or woven into furniture.[5]

[5] Kente is a traditional, strip woven fabric from Ghana in West Africa. Ankara is a textile associated with countries in sub-Sahara Africa, although originally from Indonesia passed through Dutch trade routes.

Sculptured pieces were also placed at the extreme ends of the anteroom. The man introduced himself to me as Jumbe, the co-owner of the gallery. He said he would be conducting the tour for me; I asked if it was free, and to my unfeigned surprise, he replied in the affirmative. My mind flashed back to other art galleries I visited in Atlanta in the previous months, where payment was given. As we made our way through the corridors, I asked Jumbe about this and he said, “We just want people to enjoy the space.” Passing through a library, he motioned to the room and said, “You can come in here, sit, and read a book.” “We also have an art shop,” he said enthusiastically as we made our way to the next room which was tastefully designed with numerous objects and wall hangings from African fabrics, household décor items, figurines, and pieces of jewelry. The corridors of the gallery were also used to display artworks. I found it impressive how the space was deployed to curate a range of cultural experiences.

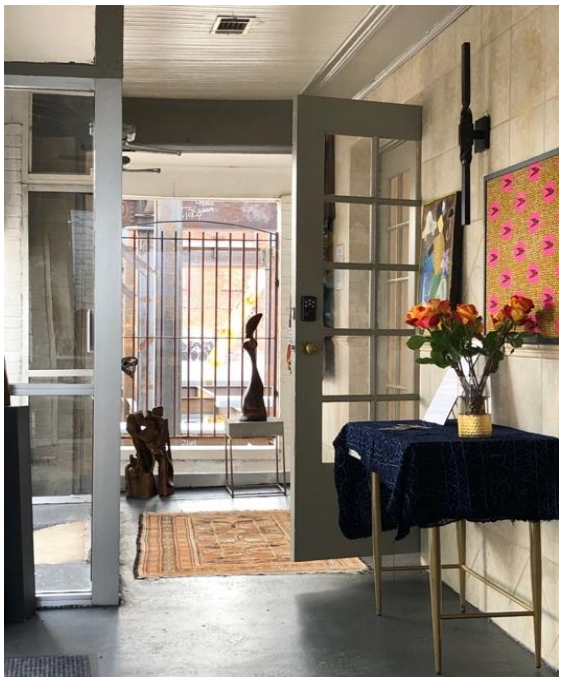


*Figure 6: The gallery's Lobby.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, September 2023*

*Figure 7: Sculptures at the gallery's entrance.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, September 2023*

*Figure 8: The main gallery space.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI gallery*

*Figure 9: The gallery's art shop.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI gallery*

*Figure 10: The library.*
*Photos courtesy of aKAZI gallery*

The gallery was filled with many art forms from different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. This quaint and unassuming space heralded voices from across the continent, echoing alongside the hustle and bustle of Atlanta's cityscape. I felt like I was in a familiar environment, perhaps because of the recognizable tropes and cultural objects arranged at the entrance and throughout the gallery space. Reflecting on familiar spaces outside one's society, the term transnationalism comes

to mind. The concept can be used to explain the forms of social interactions and cultural transformations that take place in social spaces where cultures come together. I engage art museums and galleries as signifiers of transnational spaces where objects and the space itself serve as a bridge between cultures. Expanding on Pratt's (1991:34) theory of contact zones and Clifford's (1997:188-219) application of the notion to museum studies, I argue that in niche and specialized art institutions like aKAZI gallery, where cultures meet and the materiality of the subaltern is encountered (Spivak 1988), hegemonic and asymmetrical relations of power are reverted and contested not only through the objects presented as art but through the existence of the space itself. Echoing much of postcolonial sensibilities, the "subaltern" gets to speak for themselves rather than being spoken for. In this way, the gallery becomes a space to (re)claim, (re)present, and (re)contextualize narratives.[6]

The owners of the gallery, Jumbe, and Anja, are a multi-racial couple who lived in different parts of Africa for most of their career lives, spanning about twenty-five years. Jumbe, who is Ugandan, is a retired international humanitarian executive, and Anja, who is German, currently works as an educator in a school in Atlanta. It had been their lifelong dream to establish an art gallery and share their art collections from areas they had lived in while in Africa (mostly the Eastern, Western, and parts of Central Africa), with a diverse and international audience. Museum or Gallery curators are responsible for acquiring, managing, and displaying cultural objects and artifacts which in this case include a wide range of products of art, from paintings to sculptures, furniture to pieces of jewelry. In more institutionalized settings such as the High Museum, this role is differentiated, and specialists serve as curators of the Museum's different collections. In the

[6] Taking the usage from Spivak (1988), the word subaltern is used to refer to racial minority groups.

case of smaller scale institutions like aKAZI Gallery, the roles of owner, director, and gallerist/curator are combined.

Given some of the stereotypes that exist about Africa, and mainstream media's perpetuation of conditions of wars, violence, and famine as the prevailing state of African countries, the gallery was established to present new narratives about Africa to an international audience through art, "one that is less about conflict, suffering and poverty and more about coping, resilience, agency, innovation, and transformational beauty."[7] The couple's art collection moved from their home in 2019, first to a space leased in partnership with CARE Global Innovation Hub in downtown Atlanta, a co-working space aimed at tackling universal issues of social impact, innovation, and justice.[8] The gallery is currently affiliated with the Historic District Development Corporation (HDDC), one of the oldest non-profit, community development corporations in Atlanta dedicated to preserving affordable housing in the Old Fourth Ward District.[9]

One of HDDC's core principles is historic preservation, that is, the institution of developmental projects that retain the historic fabric and cultural character of the existing community. They achieve this by repurposing old properties that are historically relevant and by organizing community meetings in some of these re-purposed spaces, including showcasing arts and cultural exhibits. In a brief virtual interview that I had with the President of the organization, she noted that:

> Art is a significant part of historic preservation, and providing a communal space for art is one of the ways to contribute to this mission. Through a collaborative effort where members of the community requested a permanent art gallery, the organization stepped in

[7] https://www.akaziatl.com/founders
[8] https://issuu.com/reporter_newspapers/docs/100119_in_web/s/20679487
[9] https://www.hddc.org/about

to convert Haugabrooks into an epicenter for arts and culture in the neighborhood. aKAZI brings to the space the right mix of understanding and being exposed to the African diaspora while localizing the work. The space is part of an ongoing larger developmental scheme aimed at supporting local artists through adaptive reuse projects.

aKAZI gallery is currently housed in the re-purposed, historic Haugabrooks Funeral Home. The renovated space provides an affordable, leasable communal space in the heart of Sweet Auburn. The gallery's previous and current partnerships are strategic not only in resolving the challenge of space and real estate in a metropolis but also in reflecting values of collaboration, innovation, community development, historic preservation, and the celebration culture. The space at Haugabrooks is shared with other artists and groups who stage exhibitions periodically; it is however currently occupied by aKAZI most of the time.

The use of space and object presentation are essential considerations in the curatorial process. Moser (2010:22) points out that the ways objects are presented impart identities upon collections, this might be especially true in larger museums with a wide range of collections from different geographical regions. In the case of small-scale, specialized art institutions where all the objects presented are already categorized under an umbrella term, say for instance, an African art gallery or a science museum, space can be organized to elicit diverse responses from the audience. Presenting an object as art or artifact, for sale or not for sale, and hanging a painting in the larger gallery space vs in the art shop all have associated connotations with different effects. For instance, pieces in the art shop are often smaller and more affordable than the ones in the main gallery space.

Space provides the physical affordance to curate experiences, perceptions, and engagements, in an art gallery. I argue that spatial properties and organization in transnational art curation impact how art is consumed and circulated. Naming conventions are also important

considerations in representational practices. At the High Museum, there is a preponderance of tribal or regional affiliations and what I would call “the nameless artist phenomenon” in the classification of African art. This is perhaps because many of the objects were acquired through connections named after a donor, and so provenance is categorized based on that, or because many traditional African objects were without signatures or personal identifiers, so it is hard to trace who produced what. Ownership of traditional African art in the pre-colonial era is complex, it can belong to the individual, a family, a clan, a group, or entire communities. At aKAZI, some of the traditional African artworks suffer a similar fate, they are described by where they were sourced from, but contemporary works are presented contextually with histories and references to artists whose works are being displayed or sold. For instance, when I purchased a beaded accessory from the art shop, I was given the business card of the person who made it in Dakar, together with their social media handle, I was told, “When you wear it, you can tag them on Instagram.” Ideally, if there are no immigration constraints like visa refusals for artists coming from outside the United States, the artists themselves would be present at openings to discuss their works.

### *4.2.2 Multimodality in the Use of Museum Space*

I signed up for aKAZI’s newsletters via email to get updated on the gallery’s activities and notified of upcoming events. The first event I attended at the gallery was interestingly not art-related, it was a “sound bathing” event, which was something quite novel to me at the time. I was informally invited to the event by Jumbe on our second meeting as a good opportunity to meet Anja for the first time. I had been interacting with Jumbe alone while trying to get approval to conduct research at the gallery. I arrived at the gallery at roughly 10 a.m. on a Sunday and met about seven other young women in attendance. I met Anja as soon as I entered and was warmly

welcomed by her. She motioned to me to get some coffee and cakes layered out on a table close to the entrance. The participants who seemed to have come in groups, huddled together and sat with their coffee in hand while waiting for the event to start.

I felt a bit of anxiety given that I was unfamiliar with what was to happen but remained open-minded. I said hello to the other participants and sat on one of the gallery's long benches. The ambiance of the room was calm and reflective, set with dimmed lights and lit candles. After a couple of minutes of settling in, I noticed the other women pick up, unroll, and lay on mats that had been neatly placed close to the benches. I did the same and the session started. The facilitator whom I will refer to as Laurie, a young African American woman, sat on a beanbag surrounded by huge candle lights and sound instruments that included bowls, sticks, and chimes. She started in a slow, deliberate voice and gave a brief explanation of what she was about to do, and what to expect. The session lasted for about an hour, I drifted off at some point, struggling to stay aware of my surroundings. We were awoken from this latent mental space by a strike of the gong. Everyone sat up groggily on their mats for about a minute, and then a few people enthusiastically voiced out what parts of the session stood out for them. The session was interesting to me because the focus was not entirely on the art in the background but was a re-invention of the gallery space as the visitor moved from being an observer to becoming a participant within the space.

The notion of art museums as solely exhibitory and object-based has in recent times been experimented on and expanded by art institutions to include more diverse programming that caters to evolving socio-cultural and political trends. At aKAZI, in addition to visual art exhibitions, the gallerists also stage other art forms and community-centered events such as performance arts, book readings, wellness events, and discussions. In this way, they re-center the focus of the museum space to go beyond art. Art serves as a mediator, facilitating other forms of engagements and

communal experiences. Rethinking museum spaces by engaging alternative uses can help contextualize existing art collections, especially in the case of transnational art. Cultural motifs can be experienced more vividly through the presentation of rounded and more holistic visitor encounters.

Chi is a Nigerian writer who is also a patron of aKAZI Gallery. I spoke with her briefly after a book-reading event organized and held at the gallery to discuss one of her newly released books. The book reading event was complemented by a short dance performance created from the theme of the book, the performance artists took the audience on "an immersive journey bringing together Afro-diasporic expressions in the form of sculpture, choral verse, step, and spoken word performance."[10] During our conversation, she shared the importance of community to immigrants or new settlers in society, as well as the role of art institutions in engendering this. For her, this is one of the key roles aKAZI plays, "museums serve a dual role in bringing people with similar interests together while educating them on what is currently obtainable within the African creative space." In terms of identity formation, she recognizes that the audience at the gallery is indeed diverse, and they might have been attracted based on artistic interests rather than racial affiliations. She sees the gallery as more than an art institution but as a space where she can connect on a closer basis with like-minded individuals.

[10] Statement culled from the event's promotional material.

*Figure 11: A cultural dance troupe from Uganda performing at aKAZI.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, 2023*

In addition to Karp's (1991:3) theorization of museums moving from temple to forum, I propose the emergence of "museums as process," that is, a re-purposed social space where cultural ideas can be rendered in an experiential recontextualization of art. In this emergent process of museums, objects become active agents within social networks, mediate social relationships, and strive to project holistic understandings of the surrounding socio-cultural context. As with Foucault's concept of heterotopias, the museum space is inverted, and meanings are reinforced beyond the preponderance of narratives and perceptions that exist outside of it.

### 4.3 Sharing the Beauty of a Place: Gallerists and Curators as Cultural Negotiators

"We came back with suitcases full of art!"
- Anja

Anja and Jumbe had just returned from a month-long visit to Dakar, Senegal. These visits made periodically, were more of art tours. They made the trips to create new networks with artists

or to consolidate existing ones. I scheduled an interview with them on their return and was excited to hear about their experiences. On a warm summer evening in July 2023, I went to their house, which was a few minutes away from the gallery. It was a quiet neighborhood filled with identical houses, I got lost but eventually made it to the house, winded and a little out of breath. I was warmly welcomed, and we sat to talk over a cup of ginger ale. What caught my attention first was the way the house was designed with paintings and sculptures, even the chairs were dressed in African fabric pillow covers, this was to be expected I thought but I also thought it was quite beautiful and telling.

Noticing my fascination, Jumbe, who was born and grew up in Uganda, was quick to mention that "the gallery started with personal collections like these, people would come to visit and ask if they could purchase this artwork or that one." Anja, who is of German origin, spent much of her childhood in India and Pakistan, and had lived and worked in the UK, France, Uganda, Kenya, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Senegal, quickly added, "We were encouraged to start the gallery to share what we love about Africa, which is the art, creativity, and culture of community."

*Figure 12: Anja and Jumbe's home.*
*Photo courtesy of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, September 2021*

*Figure 13: Anja and Jumbe's home.*
*Photo courtesy of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, September 2021*

*Figure 14: Artworks at Anja & Jumbe's home.*
*Photos by Bukunmi Bifarin, 2023*

I sat on a single, revolving chair facing them in their living room. The room was brightly lit by the windows framing the edge of the sitting area. I set up my laptop on a desk in front of me to begin asking the questions I had written down. Jumbe seemed relaxed and Anja had an air of excitement around her. I asked about the kind of audiences they aimed to cater to, and Jumbe said, "Our target is to expose a dynamic idea of African art to a diverse audience and Atlanta presents access to such rich diversity, we aim to challenge existing perceptions and present a different narrative about Africa." I was curious to know how they would define African art, especially within the diasporic context, given that many artists are influenced by diverse cultures as they live in parts of the world different from their African origin. With the world becoming increasingly globalized, defining identity or cultural affiliations is becoming more nuanced. Are there cultural signifiers that still exist? Can you look at an artwork and immediately get the intuition of where the artist came from, how do you even do that? Jumbe considered this question for a while and slowly responded:

> Defining contemporary African art is not necessarily a question of origin or the cultural affiliations of the artist, but more of the period and social commentaries associated with

the artwork. Labeling is becoming increasingly difficult and many times you cannot tell simply by observing a piece. For me, the creativity that spurs out of African urban centers, the tenacity for survival despite social hardships, and statements of political activism that are evident in the artworks as more appropriate delineators of African art.

For him, defining contemporary African art goes beyond the producers' origins to artists who make narrative depictions of Africa. They try to emphasize this through the forms of art and artists represented at aKAZI.

### *4.3.1 Imagined Primitivism and Contemporary Representations of African Art.*

The African art collections at many contemporary Western museums still present African art through a neo-primitive, tribal, and exotic lens, and although many of the objects in these collections serve as important historical, educational, and cultural artifacts for many contemporary African countries, I argue that they are incomplete and there is a tension evidenced in museums trying to move beyond these archetypes by presenting more varied art forms while still holding on them. At the High Museum, for instance, I observed that objects which include power and ritual objects - objects attributed with animated power, or what are sometimes termed as "fetish" – "a term originally used by Western merchants to refer to objects employed in West Africa to make and enforce agreements, often between people with almost nothing in common" (Graeber 2005) are dominant in the permanent African art sections, and contemporary African art exhibits are presented periodically.

Addressing the question of what she thought people expected to see when it comes to African art, Anja touched on perceptions relating to primitivity and the reductive tendency to combine the whole of Africa into one entity when it comes to art. She said, "What we represent

goes very much against that, we want to show art that is grounded with a long history but also very contemporary, forward-looking, and even avant-garde." She stated that traditional African art forms which are mostly presented as African art in major museums are important parts of the story and collection, but they can present a limited understanding of the whole scale of modern African art to the audience, "what I love is when museums draw a line from traditional art forms to what is now being created… this can present very powerful narratives."

Anja mentioned that "most of the African art collection at the High Museum were acquired through donations, the curator then has to work with the abundance of these objects and strive to present new forward-looking and contextual narratives through exhibitions." She acknowledged efforts being made to exhibit contemporary art from the continent, citing the example of Bruce Onobrakpeya's: The Mask and the Cross, shown at the High Museum earlier in April 2023. I attended this exhibit and observed how the museum's curatorial team aimed to historize modernist art and early post-colonial art from Nigeria. Themes of cultural hybridity and European religious influences are reflected, and audiences are presented with a narrative that expands their view of what constitutes African art beyond the pre-colonial canon. I attended the opening of this exhibit and made a few observations. As with events at aKAZI gallery, guests were racially diverse and included a lot of art aficionados. The exhibit was presented under current special exhibits - a categorization different from the African Art or Modern and Contemporary Art section where you will usually find other African artworks[11]. This affords more exposure to the exhibition and hence, the possibility of impacting new narratives and perceptions on African art.

[11] African art here is defined by the nationality of the artist or the geographic location where the artwork is sourced from.

*Figure 15: Modernist African art exhibition at the High Museum.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, April 2023*

Through my observations, I sensed, and hence argue that there is a bit of tension or negotiations between the imaginary primitivism of African art and its actual embeddedness in the present. A mix of both would be ideal with contextual storytelling serving to draw the link between the historical trajectories. In line with this, Jumbe noted that the organization of the African art section at the High Museum was a recent intervention aimed at reflecting African influence on African American and diasporic art, and vice-versa. He says, "One interesting thing is seeing how African art is displayed in a way that reflects the influence of traditional African art forms on diaspora African American Art."

### *4.3.2 Curatorial Practice and Museums in a Neoliberal Era*

Art institutions in the United States are shaped by both private and public influences. Many are privately funded while some receive government support through grants or tax incentives. Since the 1980s, the U.S. embraced neoliberal policies which emphasize free markets, this

development affected several sectors of the economy including the art world (Steger & Roy, 2010). Art in this era is mostly seen through the lens of a commodity. Marx (1976:163-165) used the concept of commodity fetishism to describe consumer behavior in Western economies; art, as with many other commodities becomes fetishized and separated from the factors of production, and I will also argue, the cultural contexts of production. The object becomes singularized as part of a monetary-based valuation system (Appadurai 2014:68). Benjamin & Zohn (2018:15) allude to this as an "exhibition value" tied to ideas of public presentability and consumption. Art institutions also bend to market forces and make accommodations to be able to operate within the commoditized, neoliberal economy.

Discussing the challenges art institutions face in representing African art in Atlanta, Anja, and Jumbe both alluded to unique forms of limitations encountered along different organizational levels, from funding constraints in small-scale institutions to bureaucracy in larger museums. Speaking to the specific challenges they face in their curatorial practice, Anja and Jumbe both allude to the financial constraints often experienced by small organizations. Jumbe says that even though things are much different nowadays in terms of African art representation in the West, there is still a long way to go. Oftentimes, there is a need for more spaces to bring in artists to discuss their work, giving them the much-needed scholastic agency.

For a smaller gallery, events like these can be achieved through collaborations and sponsorships. Anja touched on the lack of foot traffic at the gallery but acknowledged that "you really can't expect someone to casually walk in and buy an artwork for $3000, you have to draw people in." Organizing art events is one way to do this. By developing events centered around the showcase of art, they can attain both financial and relational support. Events also present opportunities to develop new networks within the art scene and meet with potential collaborators.

### *4.3.3 Authenticity in the Consumption and Representation of African Art*

Handler (1986:2) argues that authenticity is a cultural construct of the modern Western world and not an inherent property of objects or people, he sees the concept as being closely tied to notions of Western individualism as opposed to collective cultures, he quotes Trilling (1974) who interprets sincerity and authenticity together as, "the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretense in both the individual and society (Trilling 1974:13)." I argue that authenticity as a concept can be ascribed to art objects and associated institutions in the transnational circulation of cultures between different valuation systems. In his ethnography on Aboriginal paintings of central Australia, Myers (2002) considers the complex dynamics between culture, authenticity, and exchange values. He speaks about how artists as cultural producers and other institutional bodies often tweak their products to appeal to the international market to gain recognition (Myers 2002:120-146). Striving for an authentic representation thereby involves striving for sincerity on an individual and institutional level, while considering the interplay of market forces, that is, what people want or expect to see as representative of a culture.

Beauty and authenticity can be subjective and are socially negotiated and constructed. Museums were historically believed to present objective versions of the cultures being represented, that is, aiming to display what is "authentic" to these cultures. However, there are emerging theories that point to the inherent subjectivity that comes from the curatorial process. Questions like, who is designing the exhibit? What sort of worldviews are they employing to frame their research process? What are their biases? These are all important considerations in recent studies of the museum space as a process. In the case of aKAZI, artists shown are selected based on whether or not the curators like them, they are also selected through established relationships based

and built on trust. In some cases, there are suggestions from collaborators, word of mouth, and technological platforms like social media. According to Anja, they aim to "shatter the monolith, to show very different things like the authentic, communal African spirit…and all of these comes from the African continent or the diaspora, they are all valid and valuable, and they all have stories to tell." The artworks shown and sold at the gallery are diverse in form and range from paintings to sculptural pieces. A few are pictured below:


*Figure 16: Guewel by Audrey D'Erneville. Digital Fine Print.*
*Photo Courtesy of aKAZI gallery*


*Figure 17: Newspaper of Kampala Road by Martin Jjunju. Acrylic on Canvas.*
*Photo Courtesy of aKAZI Gallery*

*Figure 18: Meditation in Barkcloth 1 by Christine Nyatho. Barkcloth Collage and Acrylic on Canvas.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI Gallery*

I asked Anja and Jumbe what they thought about interpretations given to the displayed artworks, whether African or African American patrons connected more with the pieces and then bought for that purpose. Their response was quite unexpected, “That's not the case,” Jumbe said, “There are plenty of white people who have bought art from us just because they appreciate it, what we know that serves more on the African American level is the gift shop. We are very happy when we see all age and racial groups. What we would love to see more of is interest from the very wealthy African American people who live in Atlanta.” I thought this was an interesting point to make, seeing that personalized items from the gift shop like African fabrics and pieces of jewelry can serve as easy pointers in the performance of one’s identity and, hence, are consumed more by African Americans and Africans in the diaspora. Larger pieces of art like paintings and sculptures are bought more for their aesthetic appeal than interpretations or connections based on race. I will categorize this more as a class signifier rather than an identity signifier.

After the interview, which lasted for about an hour, Jumbe took me on a tour of the remaining parts of their house – through their bedrooms, offices, and even the garage, all filled with art from various parts of Africa. It was interesting that he remembered not only the names of the artists but the exact place, sometimes even the moment the artwork was acquired. Each had a unique story, context, and personal meaning to them, relationships between the artists and collectors were also relished through the stories told repeatedly. The artworks have undergone a long journey, thousands of miles from Africa, and are now gracing a modern home in Atlanta. To the couple, the collections represented valuable mementos of their networks and journeys through the African continent, and this is what they hope to share with friends and communities in the diaspora.

## 4.4 Collecting Culture: Aesthetic, Interpersonal, and Institutional Considerations

Collectors are critical players in the world of art. Art institutions, particularly art galleries, are often financed through patronage and the buying of artworks, and so collectors often constitute a major form of institutional support. The following are narratives from interviews I conducted with five patrons of aKAZI gallery all of whom are also involved within the broader African art scene in Atlanta. These patrons are collectors and major supporters of the gallery and range from academics to project managers, international workers, teachers, and writers. They describe their motivations for engaging with the gallery, buying pieces of art, and the larger implications of representing African art in art museums and galleries across Atlanta.

Collecting art as a mode of consumption is distinct from visiting galleries and museums. According to Chen (2009), collecting and exhibit visits operate on different consumption levels and valuation systems. Collecting is an art, and one that is influenced by a variety of factors ranging from personal interests, value systems, and even psychological needs to the extent of bolstering perceptions about the self (Baekeland 1981). In these interviews, I explore collectors' motivations, perceptions, and thoughts on the consumption of African art in Atlanta.

### *4.4.1 More than Meets the Eye: Race and the Politics of Representation*

> "They have successfully created communities around African art, and I think that's valuable."
> -Mag

Mag, a Ugandan academic, artist, art historian, and curator, is a major supporter and collector of art from aKAZI gallery. My conversation with her made me appreciate certain forms of institutional limitations and politics that come into play in the representation of African art. For this meeting, I was invited to her home for a weekend lunch alongside other African students from

one of the universities in Atlanta. It was a very Pan-African setting with a representation of young academics from different counties in Africa. A softly spoken woman, in her late thirties or early forties, Mag seemed like the kind of person who served as a rallying point and support system for younger academics. Her home, situated in a quiet suburb of Atlanta, was filled with a broad range of artworks of different genres – landscape, portrait, and abstract paintings, some of which she painted herself, she also showed me a few she had collected from aKAZI. The dinner table was lined with bowls of stewed vegetables, chicken sauce, and rice cooked in different ways. Some of the guests brought food from their countries and I was excited to find that someone had brought some Nigerian Jollof[12]. The living area was filled with students engaged in casual conversations, many of whom I was meeting for the first time. "Where are you from?" was often the icebreaker after which people proceeded to talk about what they did. Most of the conversations tended to people sharing their immigration experiences, from challenges encountered to ways of navigating a foreign terrain.

By early evening, people had started to leave, and I got a chance to sit briefly with Mag to have this interview. All smiles, donning a simple sky-blue gown, she motioned for me to sit with her on the terrace. I asked her to speak about her experiences engaging with African art in a Western context both as a curator and collector. She started by acknowledging the racial diversity in patronage of African art in the United States and then reflected on a recent exhibition she curated at a university museum. The museum she said, had an already established clientele, "the Department of African Studies at the university serves as the primary audience, so when they organize exhibitions, they think about feeding into the African studies syllabus." In this sense, curated exhibitions are often geared towards teaching students about Africa.

[12] Jollof is a West African staple made from a blend of rice, tomatoes, onions, and peppers.

Speaking to a variety of audience responses to the exhibitions, she identified the interests of different groups: “The university community is interested in knowing not only about the art, but the social and political context in which the art is made.” Describing viewer engagements on a more individual scale, she said:

> I find that some people try to connect it to US politics - US Black politics, which sometimes is strenuous…it's like the issues that somebody might be dealing with in Kenya might be related sometimes, but sometimes they're very different… but as a viewer who might be African American, they try to find that connection, sometimes it works, sometimes I think maybe it's pushing too much.

She goes on to talk about a category of people who engage with the exhibit based on experiences they have had from visiting parts of the continent, “there are people who have been to the continent and are interested, just because they have an experience having been in the countries where artists are coming from. So, there is that a crowd who is looking for connections.” Her observations of audience reactions are in line with some of my observations at aKAZI gallery; usually, there is a diverse audience of people who have some sort of association with the continent either from time spent working and living there or through familial relations. Racial considerations are crucial in the exhibition and consumption of African art in the diaspora. There is the responsibility and drive to represent cultures accurately and authentically while also challenging stereotypes and misconceptions. There is always the consideration of the imagined audience and what they would like to see, as such, the artworks represented can be determined by existing ideals of what constitutes African art.

Connections to the gallery space are defined by these social dynamics and one common denominator is the desire to establish communal relationships based on variously defined identities

and interests in art. It is noteworthy that the reactions or interpretations given to the artworks displayed are not particularly distinct based on race. Patrons do not spend time discussing the formal qualities of the works, rather, the art serves as a backdrop and an avenue to pursue social relationships. This form of engagement stands starkly against what is obtainable at the High Museum, where visitors can be seen in isolated contemplation. The museum setting affords a different form of interaction and engagement, not just with art but with other visitors within the space. Mag explains it this way, "People are curious to know what is coming out of Africa, and the gallery presents that in addition to building a community around African art." In terms of the spatial arrangement of the High Museum and the forms of narratives it creates, Mag takes a dual position on the way the African art lobby is flanked by Folk Art and African American art, she says, "I like the way it is installed, you move from the African art section to folk art…it's a good flow because you feel Africa does not stop here, but I find it could be problematic too because the folk art is often the kind of thing people associate with non-trained artists and with Africa; that kind of association sits uneasy with me but then it's a good transition."

Politics in representational practices are evident in various forms across the various levels of art institutions. In small-scale galleries, they come into play in the choice of works displayed and the artists represented, all of which determine the forms of narratives being promoted. In larger museum settings, representational choices are impacted by issues like funding, budget allocations, institutional cultures, and bureaucratic processes. For Mag, these are major determinants of the forms of art collected and exhibited, "there's more than meets the eye", She says, "With the museum, it's a different context, decisions come from the institution, which is run by a Board, a curator is at the lowest rung of the decision-making process...once you choose the art, you still have to go through an acquisitions committee for approval." So even as museums try to move

away from fixed representations of African art, there are all these institutional limitations in operation.

Citing the exhibition she curated at the university museum, she says that contemporary African artworks were acquired through a donation because the institution saw a gap in the existing collection. The direction of the collection was spearheaded by the African Studies department from the realization that there is so much going on the continent that cannot be talked about through the current collection, the new works were acquired to be more representative in terms of emerging art from the continent, and for their potential to generate newer conversations. In addition to the creativity and insight needed in curatorial practice, things are often more political and not a one-way street. There is a need to cater to extenuating socio-economic and political situations in the realization of what a current and appropriate vision of African art would be.

### *4.4.2 Beyond Race: Performative Identities and Communal Belonging through Art*

"My art and my character, not my color, makes me a part of the African art community."
-Sandy

An elderly white woman welcomed me with a wide, brimming smile as I approached her door, "you made it!" she said cheerily as she hugged me and led me into her home. Located in a quiet neighborhood in Midtown Atlanta, her home which doubles as her art studio, boasts of walls filled with beautiful arts and crafts. She invited me to her kitchen table, asking me to help myself with pieces of bread, cheese, and some fruits she had carefully set out. I shuffled through the kitchen, careful not to spill my small plate of food, and sat down to talk with her. I had come prepared with a set of questions written in my notebook but ended up having more of a discursive, unstructured interview, with her giving me a tour of the artworks hung throughout the walls of her

large home. An artist herself, Sandy had practiced collecting pieces of art from sculptures to paintings, and woven baskets. She has lived in Atlanta for most of her life, she considers the city as home and shares the sentiment of the uniqueness of the city: “everybody’s here,” she said, “there’s such a beautiful diversity that makes everyone comfortable.” Her art of quilting is inspired by the diverse cultures she encounters, and she tells the story of a united humanity by bringing together bits and pieces of fabrics from distinct cultures and societies of the world to make vibrant collages.

She uses a mix of fabrics, some of which have popular usage within African and African diaspora communities, like the Ankara fabric in her art of quilting, “I want to tell this story of oneness, not division through my art” she said. As a collector of art at aKAZI, she talked to me about the chance meeting and instant connection she felt with Anja and Jumbe, saying that their mission seemed to resonate with what she was trying to communicate through her art. “Anja and Jumbe bring me wonderful pieces of fabrics from their travels to Africa, and I cut them up to use in my collage.” aKAZI has also shown and sold some of her artworks. One of the missions of the gallery is to provide support by giving a platform and visibility to artists who might have otherwise found it difficult to navigate the competitive art world in North America, this mission serves African and African diaspora artists, but in the case of Sandy, perhaps the subject matter of her art and the close relationship she shares with the gallerists made a showcase possible.

*Figure 19: One of Sandy's quilted artworks using a mix of fabrics.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI gallery, 2019*

Although she had not been to Africa herself, her late husband worked in African countries like Ghana and Nigeria, covering elections. “My husband had been to Africa, and I have absorbed from his experiences. During his time there, she said, “he made it a practice to collect art and cultural objects from the various places he visited.” He managed to acquire an impressive collection of art from various parts of the world and through this indirect encounter, she developed an affinity for and has collected a lot of artworks, particularly from African American artists. She took me on a tour of the rest of her house, telling me how and where she got each artwork from, and the various connections she had with the artists. She had a lot of traditional African art sculptures collected by her husband and pieces she bought from exhibitions she visited within and outside the United States.

For Sandy, her patronage and collecting practice are a function of her love for art and support for growing art institutions, “I like to buy and sell art that is beautiful and that I connect

with in some way, and I think it is important to support small-scale art organizations like aKAZI." She showed an appreciation of the complex dynamics that come into play in running a specialized gallery, particularly the limitations that could be posed due to financial constraints. Her engagement patterns reflect the occurrence of belonging beyond race into what I would argue is a performance of identity that has to do with class and perceptions of value.

Engaging with material cultures such as art and artifacts can serve as pointers to different expressions of self, be it racial, class, or gender-based identities. One of my main hypotheses starting this research was that the consumption and circulation of African art in the diaspora would be carried out mostly by African immigrants and African American populations, and I aimed to explore how these impacted ideas of self and community. My findings, however, reveal a wide range of diversity in the consumption of African art in Atlanta, particularly in specialized and community-centered art galleries like aKAZI. Here, patronage is not only a function of racial affiliations but a performance of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Social and cultural capital stem from social networks that the gallerists cultivate through work relationships and interest groups within the city. Collecting as a form of consumption presents an added layer of economic consideration and can serve as a form of class performance that aids or leads to the accumulation of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

#### *4.4.3 A Drawing of the Soul: Collecting and the Presentation of Self*

*"I do not have an explanation for why I connect with African art so much, but I feel it represents my soul."*
*-Kat*

I spoke with Kat over Zoom. In the background, I could see a striking art collection consisting of several large-sized paintings and figurative objects, her home was reminiscent of a

bohemian taste. In our exchange over email, while setting up the meeting, she was excited to know how “a Belgian’s interest in African art can contribute to the research.” That fact also increased my interest, and I was curious to understand her motivations. A middle-aged Belgian woman, Kat is a teacher with a passion for the arts and creativity; over time this passion has developed into collecting art and supporting artists by promoting their art, “I have always been interested in the practice of art,” she said, “but my parents were opposed to it, now I have made collecting my entryway into the world of art.” Collecting for her is a way of reclaiming a path that could have been and reinventing an identity through conscious self-presentation (Goffman 1990:13).

She collects mostly African art, including paintings and sculptures; regarding this she said, “I connect with African art on a deep level, the art is vibrant, and it shows so much love for life. It is so earthy, full of continuation, like the beauty you find in nature.” In the collection of African art, collectors are sometimes orientated to focus on the ageless, transcendental nature of the object, which imbues the artwork or artifact with legitimacy and value (Stoller 2003:225). When I asked about concerns of authenticity especially in the collection of traditional African art forms, she said, “The sculptures I buy from friends and galleries, well, I just have to trust them, I always encourage small businesses and artists directly if I can.” This follows a perceived idea of authenticity and valuation systems that stem from expectations and trust. By visiting galleries and museums, she makes contacts with artists, she also follows them on social media and sometimes reaches out to them that way. “It's a beautiful community,” she said, “and I do believe it's an opportunity to meet very interesting people, people who are authentic, which I think is a rare quality these days and in this society.” She only buys an artwork if she connects with it, a statement that had been recurrent in people’s collecting practices.

Kat spoke to me about one factor that impacted her love and interest in African art: “I lived in Charleston South Carolina for a while before moving to Atlanta; while there, I got to know about the history of Gullah Geechee people and that really got me interested in African art.” The Gullah people can be found in coastal areas of North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, they are descendants of enslaved Africans, many of whom came from rice-cultivating regions of West and Central Africa (Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission 2017). They have managed to preserve a lot of African cultural patterns in their language, art, crafts, music, foodways, and systems of beliefs, forming a sort of creolization or syncretism with African and Western traditions.

She excitedly showed me a basket she bought from the Gullah people: “they have a special talent for making baskets, she said, but also paintings; Charleston marked the first time I started looking into African and Afro-American art.” She was fascinated by these cultures and started researching deeper, and then collecting African art. In the process, she discovered online sites put together by American curators who frequent different African countries and brought back artworks by upcoming artists to America. The role of technology in the circulation of African art is evident here. Art institutions in this age typically have an online presence to promote their works and provide access that goes beyond national borders. Boundless online spaces are non-spaces that serve as added nodes in information-sharing and collecting practices within the art world.

#### *4.4.4 Legacies of the Trade: Afrocentrism and Transnational Networks*

Art and artifacts sold at aKAZI gallery are sourced from trips made by Anja and Jumbe to different parts of Africa. They also get connected to artists this way or through links with established social networks within Atlanta. Transnational networks of exchange are grounded in

perceptions of common identity while still recognizing that these identities are negotiated within a social world that spans beyond one's place of origin (Vertovec 2001:573-582). This dynamic of integration and differentiation is seen in the way immigrants live by maintaining social links to their home countries while trying to situate their identities in a new society.

One of the major collaborators with aKAZI is Jean, a curator, and collector of African art, currently living in Atlanta. Jean is a middle-aged man from Guinea who has lived in parts of Africa and the United States. He used to run his African art gallery, though he was focused on showcasing art from the French-speaking parts of Africa. When aKAZI started in 2018, he decided to collaborate with them by connecting them with artists and helping to organize exhibitions. I was invited to his house on the outskirts of the city for the interview. His house doubles as a gallery and a repository for all his collections; it was a remarkable display on a larger scale than any of the other homes I had visited.

Jean started collecting African art as far back as 1983 from countries like Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Guinea. He was inspired by his mother who had also been involved in collecting art while in Guinea. He learned the rules of the art market and became involved with artists and practitioners within the African art space. Upon moving to Atlanta, he made allowances to transform his inherited home and the pieces entrusted in his care, together with the ones he had started collecting, into a space to organize art salons and exhibitions. Fluent in English, French, and German, he has been able to cross language barriers to navigate through the transnational African art trade markets. He has been involved with aKAZI since its inception and has contributed a wealth of experience, expertise, and networks to the gallery through collaborative practices.

Speaking about the forms of African art representation across Atlanta, he recognizes the scarcity of extant representations of contemporary African art in major museum collections, which

for him is limiting and incomplete. Galleries have the flexibility to tell a different story when compared to the static environment of a museum. According to Jean, African art galleries were also a rarity in Atlanta, which is interesting given the large Black population in the city; this motivated him to start one. He began by organizing exhibits featuring arts and artifacts from Africa: "the artists told me on one of my trips in 2009, why don't you organize an exhibit for us in the United States, and we did, and it was a successful one." From this, he started getting contacts and requests from other African artists to represent them and to introduce them to art markets in the United States. Beyond the commercial value, he needed to establish a strong working relationship with the artists before representing them, as this reflects on him as a person within the transnational community: "I have to visit the artist, see the work in person, and see if there is a connection before I get involved."

The artworks in his collection pictured below, fall within the category of "traditional, fetish, or tribal African art." Most of these were obtained from his visits to various local African art markets. Recognizing that this category fits the predominant perception of what constitutes African art in the West, particularly among common people, he says, "We have to go through some education to understand the full picture, for example, if a white anthropologist goes somewhere like Nigeria and asks about these objects, the person will be presented with explanations acceptable for him or her to understand." Such explanations could selectively ignore certain usages of the objects. Adding to the theme of popular perceptions, he said, "African art representation in the West is usually conceived and presented as a country, not a continent, and there is the question…is it art, or is it not? Because most of the time, these objects were created for functional and not just decorative purposes."

Jean believes that it is important to develop narratives around the full context of African art in Western collections, but it is also understandable that objects change in their social meanings when they are translated between cultures and different social contexts. Speaking to the issue of authenticity in African art production and consumption, I asked if the artists and craftsmen he is familiar with play to the perceptions and expectations from the Western market. He replied, "Well, you can tell the difference between something they sell at the airport and something they use at the village, the time it's made is a telling factor, there is art made for the tourist and there are more authentic forms… certain physical checks can be done to decide where or not they are authentic." This knowledge stems from his familiarity with trade secrets in the African art market. The concern with art and authenticity in the age of mass reproduction as losing their soul or aura by duplication (Benjamin & Zohn 2018) is also evident in African art production with concerns about "primitive fakes" being sold and circulated within the market. As Steiner (1994:7) puts it: "Very early on in the trade, newly carved objects were being artificially aged - their patina, coloration, and surface wear being carefully altered – so that the objects could be marketed in the West as antique or 'authentic' art."

*Figure 20: Display of African art pieces on Jean's living room wall.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, October 2023*

At Jean's house, I happened to meet other art curators who had been invited for lunch; Jean had a practice of hosting salon-like conversations with people involved in the African art space. Lauren, the current curator of African art at the High Museum was one of the guests. We had conversations revolving around museums and representations in the United States. Lauren is a young African American woman who has worked in different museum settings within Atlanta. She shared her unique curatorial experiences working with the Atlanta community: "Atlanta is known as the 'Black Mecca' of the United States; it is important to cater to this community in terms of visual representations and engagements. There are particularly a lot of Nigerians here and I would love to develop exhibits that spotlight modern and contemporary artists, I might be a little biased here because I have Nigerian roots," she said with a smile.

Afrocentrism as a worldview can be used to examine the interests' African American communities have in collecting African art. Stoller (2003:16) describes Afrocentric identification through the ownership of cultural signifiers like artworks as a way by which African Americans and Africans in the diaspora get to explore and connect with their African heritage. In addition to these intangible benefits, art collections can also present varying levels of exchange value based on the market system (Zolfagharian & Cortes 2011). There are diverse forms of benefits for Black Diasporic groups in consuming African art, including sentimental and monetized values (Appadurai 2014: 79).

Lauren also spoke about the gaps in the representation of African art at the High Museum and some of the recent efforts being made to close these gaps. She spoke about funding constraints: "you need to be able to convince stakeholders of the relevance of a particular curatorial direction before it gets approved. She added, "I would love to build more educational content around exhibits so that it goes beyond mere sightseeing and becomes more engaging and memorable, I would also like to have the exhibits shown for longer periods so more people can have access to them." At the High Museum, there are multiple stakeholders and levels of command hence, the curator whose role is to research ideas for the exhibits, organize the sourcing or acquisition of artworks, and develop associated programming, remains subject to various institutional exigencies and limitations. The more layers there are to the organizational structure, the more representational politics are involved. Contrasting this with aKAZI, one can see a greater sense of agency in what the curators at aKAZI choose to represent.

## 4.5 Cultural Crossroads, Community Building, Consumption, and the Performance of Identity: Observations at aKAZI Gallery.

On quiet evenings, with the sun setting beyond the horizon of the historic district, you find rows of cars parked along the narrow road adjourning the building where aKAZI is located. Guests trickle in, individually or in groups, and it is common to see them wearing an array of colorful African-styled clothing. For one event, I sat at a makeshift table at the entrance where I had volunteered to help welcome guests. The table was covered with a beautiful indigo-dyed fabric on which printed programs for the event, pens in a cup that read “black art matters” and contact cards for the gallery were arranged. My job was to smile, greet the guests as they arrived, and get them to fill in their contact details on a sheet of paper so that they could get updated on future events.

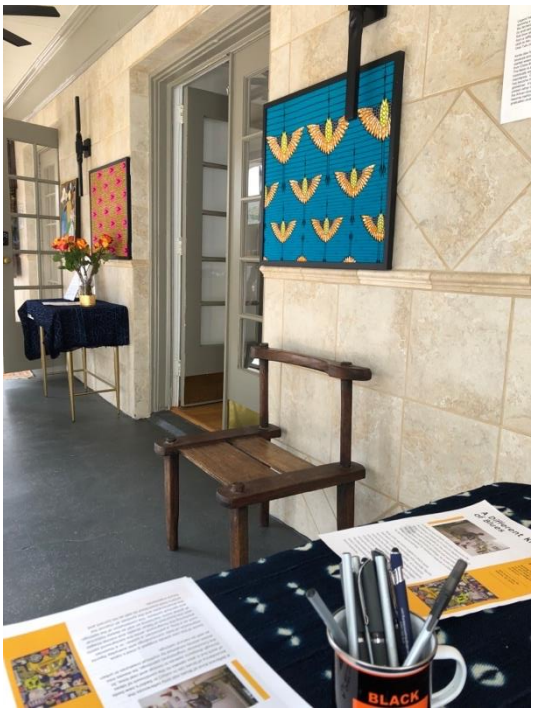



*Figure 21: Welcome Table at one of the Gallery's events.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, October 2023*

Many of these guests were people who loved and were involved in the creative sector and were seeking new creative communities that catered to their taste, within the metropolis. They were art aficionados, artists, art professionals in Atlanta, and others with a broad range of professional experiences including students from universities within the city, teachers, international workers, and people involved in humanitarian work. These individuals were from diverse racial backgrounds and ranged from children who had come in with their parents to seniors who needed a bit of assistance navigating the building. During my first meeting with Jumbe, he was quick to attribute the essence and continuity of the gallery to the various forms of partnerships, support, and patronage they enjoy from their established local network of friends, "we owe a lot of our success to our community of friends who constantly support us." These events are staged primarily to highlight a solo artist or a group of artists at a time. I went through the gallery's online archives of previous exhibits to gain a broad overview of the kinds of events held at the gallery before I started attending in person. I attended most of the events held at the gallery during this research. The gallery's mission statement reflected on its website is to bring awareness of diverse arts from Africa to an audience in the United States; they do this by employing various strategies to (re)write existing narratives and perceptions surrounding African art as well as various alternative forms of exhibitory practices in use.

One of the first exhibits held at the gallery was tailored to display a collection of African traditional fabrics, emphasizing their historical use and cultural relevance, the story of movements through different societies, and how these cultural elements have been re-appropriated over the years in different social settings. The exhibit also explored the impact of modern technologies on the pervasiveness and infusion of ancient traditions in modern art and design. Additionally, it touched on the economic value that trade or artisanship in African fabrics can bring to individuals

and communities. Some of the fabrics and materials exhibited were made available to be purchased online and onsite. I found this exhibit to be reflective of ideas of cultural patrimony and the fluidity of access provided by globalization and modern technologies.

*Figure 22: African Fabrics Exhibit.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI gallery, 2019*

With a mission to create new narratives about Africa, the gallery's exhibits display stories of resilience, vitality, and innovation coming out of the continent. Artists from cities in Africa such as Johannesburg, Dakar, Lagos, Accra, Kampala, and Maputo are usually spotlighted. There is an observable multiplicity of voices and experiences in the artworks presented. In discussing the impact of globalization and transnationalism within the African art world, Stoller (2003:221) engages the metaphorical idea of the crossroad to capture the complex social, economic, and technological dynamics that come into play when cultures intersect, and time and space are compressed. The crossroad is a significant concept in West African and Afro-Caribbean religions;

it represents a point of intersection between the spiritual and natural world (Stoller 2003:221). Libations given as appeasements to deities are often placed at crossroads. The gallery space can be conceptualized as a contemporary reincarnation of the crossroad – a transnational crossroad where cultures and universes of meaning intersect. I found it curious that the religious-laden word "libations" is often used in promotional materials by the gallery to refer to the foods and drinks offered to guests at events.

Cheerfully welcomed guests move from the front desk to a room where nibbles and canapés are provided. Holding either a bottle of water or canned refreshments, with the printed programs, they make their way to the main gallery space. It takes about 20 minutes for people to settle in and meet and greet before Anja and Jumbe, and sometimes a curatorial collaborator officially welcomes the guests and introduces the artist and the theme of the exhibit. After this, guests move around to view the artwork and begin to congregate in groups of twos and threes. Small talk is the dominant form of engagement. Guests can speak with the showcased artist(s) and ask questions about their motivations and the meanings embedded in their works. One of the visitors, a young African American lady commented to me about this "I love that we have the artists present, it is great that we get to engage them and hear their perspectives."

Storytelling is an important feature in exhibitory practice, and having the curators and creators present lends an important layer of providing context to the stories being told. The power of storytelling has been highlighted as having an enormous potential to create personal connections between visitors and the content in museum settings (Bedford, 2001). In situations where the artists cannot be present due to immigration issues, the gallerists engage in multimodal digital storytelling initiatives, like what is pictured below.

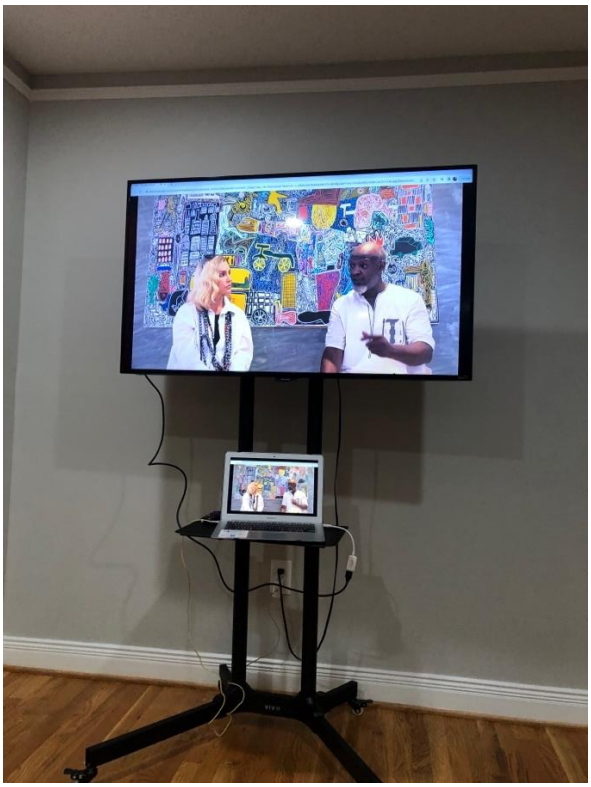


*Figure 23: An artist talking about his works at aKAZI.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, October 2023*

Event openings last about two hours, and over the time, guests move into new groups and float into new conversations. The conversations are partly centered on the artworks on display and are focused on socialization. Although the artworks are for sale, few of the guests buy them at the openings. I observed that a lot of patrons were drawn to pieces of artifacts put up for sale at the gallery's art shop, which are often more affordable than the exhibited artworks. A guest of Haitian descent was notably excited to purchase a burgundy mud-cloth fabric that cost about a hundred dollars on the spot, she mentioned how excited she was to wear them to festivals around the city.

Some participants saw the events as opportunities to network with other artists and to create visibility for their artistic practice. A Florida-based artist, born in Guadeloupe makes art that is focused on representing Black natural hair expressions as forms of resistance and identity. She

smiled broadly as she approached my group of three: “I love how you all have your natural hair on!” she said. “I saw you all from afar and I thought I must speak with you; you all are representing the narratives I am trying to portray through my art.” Though she was not part of the artists on view, she shared flyers with us and invited us to an exhibition she had in the works.

There are also expressions of sociality, commercialization, and performance of identity among patrons. The concept of diaspora aesthetics is characterized by its hybridity and the negotiation of multiple identities, Canclini (2014) sees art in the contemporary world as increasingly hybrid and reflective of the diverse cultures and experiences that constitute life in today’s societies. The experiences that come with migration and transnationality can be seen in the various constituents of the diasporic art universe, not just in the substance of the art created but also in the processes of art curation, circulation, and consumption. This social hybridity underscores the formation of transnational networks and communities (Stoller 2003: 222).

I attended an event tagged as “an evening of art and conversation” on a Saturday in December 2022. It was a meet-and-greet centered around the current exhibition of artists from East Africa (Rwanda and Uganda specifically). I got to the gallery around 4 pm on a Sunday, and there were a few people around, including Anja and Jumbe. I got a cup of coffee and chatted with Jumbe for a little while. “How are your studies going?” “Fine,” I responded, sharing a few details about the demands of schoolwork. Soon after, Anja intercepted and started to introduce guests who had begun to congregate to one another.

This event was designed as more intimate than the usual openings. There were about fifteen guests in total. The purpose of most conversations was for people to get to know each other, thoughts on the artworks themselves were private and contained. The event served as a mediator of sorts in bringing together people from different social categories with similar interests together.

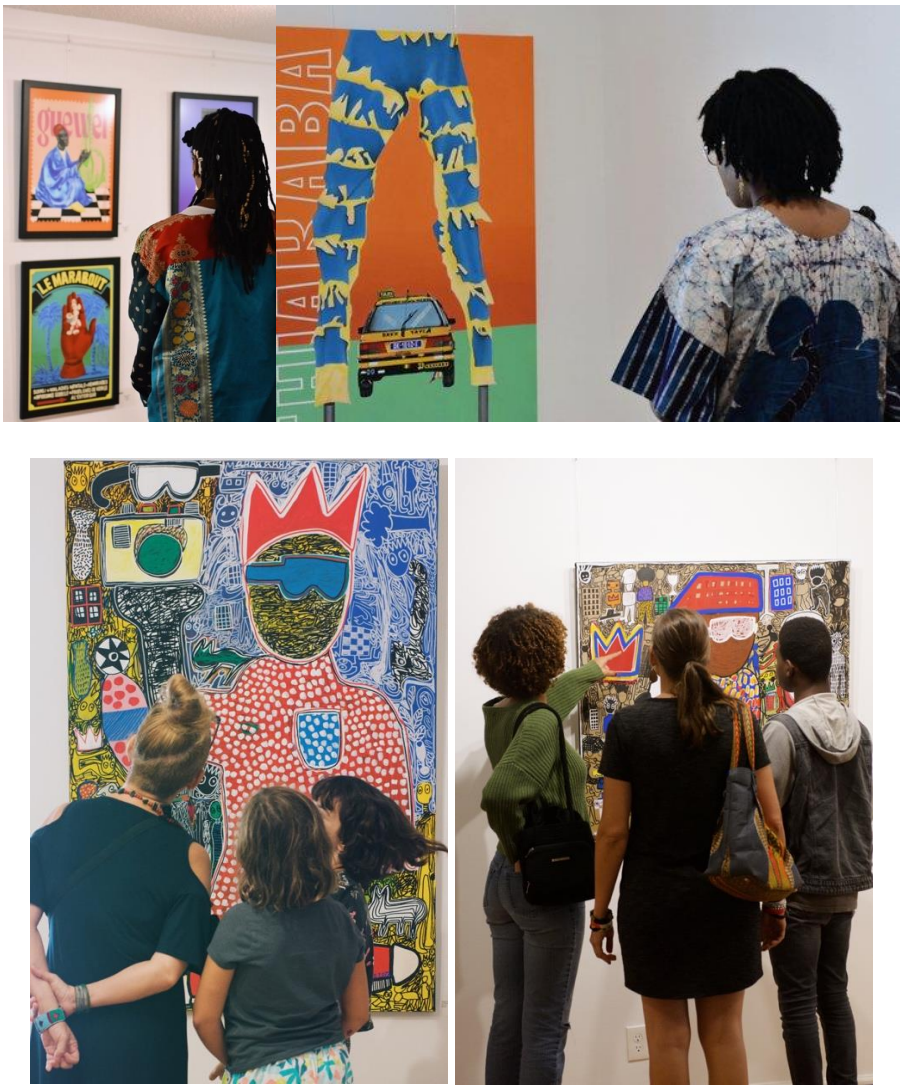
I had a brief conversation with an older African American woman, garbed in a tie-dye gown with her hair in dreadlocks, “Where are you from?” she asked, and upon hearing that I was Yorùbá, she talked about how she had taken up a Yorùbá name after encountering the Òyótúnjí village in South Carolina (a religious and cultural community for African American practitioners modeled after West African Yorùbá villages). She encouraged me to visit the community and spoke of her desire to visit Ile-Ife, a Yorùbá town in Nigeria.

Another guest, a Californian-born African American writer, spoke to me about his experience growing up in Atlanta and how that influenced his genre of Afro-futurist speculative poetry. He was excited to learn about an African art gallery in Atlanta “Coming to the gallery today has given me a sort of creative vigor that I did not know I needed, I see through these artworks, elements of African philosophy and creativity that had hitherto been foreign and distant to me.” The experiences of visitors are indicative of the gallery’s mission to bridge two worlds by bringing about awareness of the emerging creativity of the African continent through objects and materiality. Discussions like this were often brief and cursory. However, once connections were established, there was room for future engagements. Clifford (1997:188-219) considers cultural institutions like museums as contact zones where cultures are constructed and contested. I argue that as contact zones, small-scale and specialized art galleries can also function as spaces where identities can be performed and consolidated through the development of social networks and relationships.

“Tradition and Transmissions” was the theme of another event I attended in April 2023. It marked the opening of a new exhibition, and so the event was well attended by over fifty people. The artist, born in Senegal and who has lived in the United States, Paris, and Johannesburg, uses her art to interrogate the tension between cultural conservation and evolution through the lens of

her global experience. Her artworks celebrate a mix of ancient and contemporary African cultures evident in cities across the African diaspora: contemporary yet grounded in history and tradition. This dynamic is a common thread in many of the artworks displayed at the gallery. There is a visible focus on representing emerging contemporary African art to challenge narratives of representations.

From my observations at the gallery, cultural barriers are adumbrated by collective interests and a sense of commonality. As cultural centers, museums can also function as "third spaces," that is, neutral public spaces where people can socialize outside of their homes and work (Oldenburg 1989). According to Oldenburg, these spaces are essential not just economically but in building communities and a sense of belonging. In sprawling neoliberal cities like Atlanta, third spaces like the gallery can provide an important social and cultural fabric, especially for immigrant and Black diaspora communities. Also, in discussing the notions of Liminality and Communitas in relation to religious pilgrimage, Turner (1969) argues that by breaking down barriers between people, art can create a liminal space leading to a sense of community, shared identity, and belonging. Visiting the gallery can go beyond consumption, tourism, or leisure to serve as a sort of pilgrimage to metaphysical landscapes of imagined communities (Anderson 1983).




*Figures 24: Cross section of visitors viewing artworks at different events. Photos courtesy of aKAZI gallery, 2022-2023*

*Figure 25: Cross section of guests at the main gallery space.*
*Photo courtesy of aKAZI gallery, 2023.*

Ong (1999) examined the concept of transnationalism by studying the lives of Chinese immigrants who navigate transnational spaces through the accumulation of forms of social and cultural capital. She calls this "flexible citizenship." One of the ways her study participants practiced the accumulation of cultural capital was through patronage and support for the arts, although their motivations primarily stemmed from the need to attain social status within their communities. My study participants, most of whom belong to the middle class, actively express cultural and economic capital through their engagements with art. The owners, for instance, frame the context within which patrons can practice their cultural capital while at the same time generating economic dividends from this. OBJ

As with the other events, small interactive groups were formed, and people engaged with the artworks individually or as a group. For most of this event, I interacted with a group of four: two young men from Uganda and Senegal respectively, and two young ladies with Haitian roots. The men were academics, and one of the ladies was pursuing a graduate degree. Stories peculiar

to diverse cultures and individual experiences were traded. These discussions revealed how African art forms can be used to negotiate, mediate, and direct conversations between strangers. An emerging theme in this study is the role of art in bringing people together, sharing sentiments, and developing strategies to understand and navigate life outside their home country. Cultural barriers are broken down when people come together, albeit temporarily, by a collective interest.

Bam, the man from Senegal, was tall and chunky and in his mid-thirties; he was wearing a simple, orange-colored T-shirt. He referenced works by the Senegalese artist, Sadio Diallo hanging on the walls, “I like these because they remind me of elements from my culture, the bicycle, the combs…even the design patterns are culturally significant.” I buttress this by sharing how similar design patterns among the Yorùbá have associated meanings as well.

*Figure 26: Art by Sadio Diallo.*
*Photo by Bukunmi Bifarin, 2023*

Currently, the gallery does not attract much traffic so events like this are periodically organized to bring a lot of people together. These events are publicized on social media, the

organization's website, and through email lists and personal contacts. The flow of visitors is directed differently on event days and typical days. During events, people are led from the lobby towards the major gallery space where the art exhibit on view is displayed. Visitors then find their way to the other parts of the gallery themselves. As with a lot of museums, the art shop is located close to the entrance/exit, priming visitors to end their visit by purchasing a memento to memorialize the experience. The gallery space is temporary and transitory. Museum architecture and spatial organization have always been major constituents determining visitor relations and engagements with the art on display and with one another.

The represented artists who are also cultural producers, were described as "shapeshifters" by Anja at one of the exhibit openings. She used this phrase, which is a common mythological theme in African fables to describe the hybridity in artistic practice and the origins of the artists represented. This concept of hybridity ties to the shapeshifting trickster by referring to the mixing of distinct cultural or artistic traditions to create something new. This theme runs through the art of the diaspora in the use and incorporation of diverse cultural materials, elements, and influences, in the negotiation of multiple identities, and in the processes of art curation and consumption. The artworks presented reflect the multilayered cultural backgrounds of artists; they provide a sense of cultural heritage and belonging for patrons and foster connections between individuals and communities, most especially African Americans and people from the African diaspora. Although an interesting finding is that relations to the artwork and the forms of interpretations or connections that stem from them are not dependent on the race or cultural identity of the patron, art still serves as a conduit for cross-cultural dialogue as these patrons are from diverse cultures. According to Ames (1992), the social function of the museum enables participants to negotiate relationships within the diaspora space, claim space, and practice their cultural or class-based identities.

### *4.5.1 Culture as Spectacle: The Consumption & Commodification of Culture*

In explaining how African art moved from ethnological collections to museums, Pawłowska (2020) sees the recognition of the artistic values inherent in African art as a recent development and its subsequent evolution as a commodity. However, even though the forms of presentation and transnational exchange might have changed, the form of the African artworks present in many Western Museums have stayed true to ideas of authenticity. Consumption practices or patterns center around the creation and purchase of value which could be material or immaterial. These patterns are tied to ideas of social identity, class, morality, and political or ideological backgrounds. Running a commercial gallery entails a lot of financial commitment, making one of the major goals of the establishment to be profit-making. Although entry to aKAZI is free, profit is expected to be made through the sale of art. As discussed earlier, neoliberalism and mainstream commercialization have impacted the art sector in diverse ways, one of which is the valuation system of cultural materials; how art is valued socio-culturally is directly tied to the value it eventually can generate. Cultural objects like artifacts can move from a realm of functional use to purely aesthetic consumptive practices. I argue that this is a form of cultural commodification.

Artworks like paintings present a different dynamic because they are often produced, consumed, and circulated simply for their aesthetic properties. However, certain limitations arise when it comes to accessibility and affordability. At events held at aKAZI, guests mostly consume the paintings immaterially, through meta-consumptive, performative, and discursive practices. The gallerists, having invested a lot in purchasing these artworks, are pressed to sell and make a profit. Although the artworks are priced compared to what is obtainable on the larger art markets, many

visitors who are working or middle-class still find it hard to purchase these works. I conclude by relating a comment made to me by a guest at one of aKAZI's opening ceremonies for an exhibition. Kia is a young African American lady of Haitian descent. She had frequented the gallery a couple of times and even bought a dress from the gallery shop once. We sat together on one of the benches after going through the works on view, and I proceeded to ask about her general thoughts on the gallery "I cannot wait till I have a lot of money to truly engage with these arts by buying them, I feel it is not enough to just view and enjoy it, the artists want the financial support…the gallery needs it too, but I simply cannot afford it now." She added, "Contextual storytelling is key in curating an exhibition, and that is one thing I appreciate about coming here, it feels more personal and relatable, I also enjoy meeting lots of people here."

# 5 CONCLUSION

This research project contributes to broader dialogues on collecting, displaying, curating, selling, and engaging with African art by providing localized insights into these practices within two select art institutions in Atlanta. Through ethnographic research that includes participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted over a year-long period, I explored how art museums and galleries with transnational collections promote cross-cultural understanding, empower marginalized voices, and build community.

My findings illuminate the social aspect of museums by spotlighting the narratives of people engaged with African art in the United States. I also examined the evolving significance of African arts as they circulate transnationally, taking on new meanings within a diasporic context. The role of contemporary art institutions in negotiating perceptions and identity dynamics within a globalized world is a major theme that arose from this study. Art institutions like museums and galleries constitute significant sites of knowledge production in cross-cultural interactions and so it is pertinent to examine the very human effects these forms of representations can take through a micro-level anthropological analysis. By focusing on the cultures of representation in art institutions, my findings revealed alternative exhibitory practices engaged in by a transnational art gallery that goes beyond seeing the museum as a fixed temple-like space to engaging the museum as an ongoing, flexible process.

aKAZI gallery, the main ethnographic field site for this research, serves as a close-knit space where patrons and audiences get to consume art from Africa and build new networks and connections with one another. Many come for this social and communal purpose beyond the artworks. The owners are aware of this and capitalize on this function but also realize that profits might be at stake when people engage with the art at merely face value or for the simple aesthetic

qualities of the artworks, hence they developed new strategies to make sure that people also consume the art commercially. Contemporary museums are developing programs to go alongside their exhibitions to provide a deeper, contextual, and more nuanced understanding of the collections.

Social relationships developed at museums as often temporary and site-specific and do not often go beyond the museum space. My findings however show that in the case of smaller galleries like aKAZI, developing social relationships and providing a sense of communal belonging is one of the missions of the institutions, hence social engagements go beyond the artworks and the gallery space, which serve as mediators of these relationships. The institution engenders social interactions, community formation, and cultural exchange among diverse groups. In terms of social demographics, the gallery presents a diverse mix of races and engagements by people of distinct cultures with people frequenting the gallery to perform their racial, class-based, or social identities.

One key difference between an art museum and an art gallery is the level of commercial focus. Although both institutions involve varied forms of consumption, cultural objects put up for sale are more evidently displayed in an art gallery. At aKAZI, objects ranging from artworks, African fabrics, and souvenirs are available for purchase in the gallery's art shop. This serves as a major form of funding. Though contemporary museums might not appear to be explicitly for-profit in their mission, they try to maximize profit by tending to the public and developing programming that is centered on drawing more patrons and donations. This concept is also reflected most in curatorial practice and in the choice of what is being presented as African art in both museums and galleries. The curiosity surrounding African art and associated ideas of exoticism are themes art institutions often play into. As with many other Western museums, the High Museum is slowly opening to representing contemporary African art in a different light that goes beyond the spectacle

of "culture and traditionalism," but canonical museum practices still exist. In smaller galleries like aKAZI, funding is a major concern, so what people want or expect to see, together with the gallerists' sense of affect and agency, drives what is sold and exhibited.

In selecting what is to be exhibited, these institutions often reflect on how to balance ideas of "authenticity" while challenging stereotypes and creating new narratives about contemporary Africa. The diversity of African cultures, experiences, and artistic styles can constitute a challenge or endless opportunities for representation. Beyond being a catchphrase in post-colonial studies, the concept of decolonization is relevant in both theory and practice. African art in contemporary Western settings sometimes reflects the post-modern and post-colonial societies from which they primarily emerge, but there are still many that are reflective and representative of the pre-colonial African state. Decolonizing museums and museum practices is thereby focused on widening the narrative, and frame of reference in the representation of African art in museums.

Curatorial practice is increasingly focused on presenting art, objects, and narratives that go beyond what is traditionally depicted as African art. aKAZI's mission to present emerging art from the continent is poised to counteract negative or short-sighted narratives about the continent abounding in Western or foreign imaginations. Recognizing that the collection of African art in major art museums in Atlanta is not often as representative or accurate, they embarked on establishing their gallery of African art, going beyond solely exhibiting art and cultural objects to creating a sense of community and shared belonging that is reminiscent of many African societies. This is especially useful in community formation and understandings of a shared heritage among Black diasporic groups and African immigrants in Western societies.

The major drawback of this study is the narrow scope. Although the scope allowed for an in-depth focus and analysis of one art institution, the study would have benefited from a richer,

cross-institutional, and even cross-cultural analysis. Another limitation is in my conceptualization of African arts; Africa is not a monolith and there are so many nuances involved in the transnational representations of artworks from different African countries. Lastly, a lot of the themes, observations, and arguments made in this study are constantly evolving as art institutions are themselves developing in the face of emerging technologies, ever-changing knowledge systems, and increasing global connectivities, all of which impact the strategies engaged in the curation and representation of arts from diverse cultures and communities.

# APPENDIX

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following open-ended questions were asked during the semi-structured interviews:

### *Appendix A.1: Questions for Patrons and Collectors*

What is your current profession?

What does Africa mean to you?

Are you interested in specific areas of Africa? Why?

How and why did you become involved with African art?

How frequently do you buy or patronize African art/artists/ attend events at the gallery?

What are your perceptions and expectations of African art?

What do you think about the artworks on view at aKAZI?

Ask them if they have been to African art museums in the US. Create a connection with the High, if possible.

Does this inform and/or consolidate existing ideas?

### *Appendix A.2: Questions for Gallery Owners and Museum Curators*

How and why did you decide to sell African art?

Have you been to Africa? If so, what was your experience?

What do you think about African art collections at other local museums/galleries in Atlanta?

Where do you source artwork from?

What are the factors considered in selecting pieces for sale and exhibition?

What factors are considered in deciding which artist to represent?

What do you aim to represent through your art?

What kind of customers are you catering to, and why?

How do you reach out to them? How do you advertise?

How do you source the materials and objects (arts and artifacts) for display?

What are the goals and motivations of this institution?

Talk about the challenges and achievements so far.

What do you envision moving forward?

**Appendix B: Observational Guide**

How are artworks displayed and organized?

What forms of art objects are they? How are they formally categorized?

What stories do they tell?

Who are the artists being represented? How do they talk about and present their works?

What forms of events are held at the gallery and museum?

What is the visitor demographic?

How do visitors relate to the works presented?

Which of the objects do they buy/gravitate towards and why?

What are their understandings of the artworks? How do they conceptualize and discuss them?

Comparative patronage and sales levels

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