“Which do you prefer, natural or primitive?” The Indian trader around the corner from the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi is heavily patronized by tourists on safari. He is referring to the neatly stacked illusionistic paintings of elephants and leopards crashing through forest clearings, made by expatriates, as well as to more expressive works of “self-taught” local artists, portrayals of urban and village life from overcrowded matatus (the minibus, an omnipresent subject in urban East Africa) to life on the family shamba, or farm. Just across the street in this high-rent district is Gallery Watatu, Nairobi’s premier gallery. Here the work of the local artists is the main focus of owner Ruth Schaffner’s presentation of contemporary art. A few blocks away, in the crowded stalls of the Blue Market, the work of other self-taught artists is sold straightforwardly as merchandise, by African traders operating with low overheads and correspondingly lower prices.

Christopher Steiner’s African Art in Transit addresses the pivotal role of these untranslated middlemen, the trader-dealers. These figures appear throughout the continent: while Steiner’s book is set in West rather than East Africa, Abidjan rather than Nairobi, with a cast of Muslim traders rather than the mainly Hindu traders I encountered in my own research in Kenya, the roles they play in the economy of art and taste, and the problems they pose, are fundamentally the same. Approaching African art objects as commodities, Steiner focuses on the entrepreneurial skills of the West African traders: Steiner envisions the commodification of West African sculpture as a form of cultural brokerage by traders and dealers, in which value is established over the course of bargaining in both buying and selling. The book’s other major concern is the meaning of authenticity for African art, considered in the context of the art market, African and international. Steiner develops each of these themes in separate but overlapping arguments. Both have a significance...
that extends well beyond their physical and temporal setting in Côte d’Ivoire in the late 1980s.

In its investigation of the meaning of value in ethnographic settings, *African Art in Transit* is indebted to the landmark anthology *The Social Life of Things*. First published in 1986 (the year Steiner began his field research in Abidjan) and reprinted three times since, this dazzling collection of essays on “things” as commodities—especially highly valued things, such as art objects, oriental carpets, and saints’ relics—changed the terms of the debate on the commodification of art. Editor Arjun Appadurai’s “Commodities and the Politics of Value” describes commodification as but one phase in the life of an object, rather than an immutable characteristic of certain objects. He developed a post-

The African trader in Côte d’Ivoire is at the same time an insider and an outsider—African, yes, but not of the same culture that produces the artwork by which he makes his living

Marxian cultural anthropology of commodities from Georg Simmel’s observation that exchange is the source of value, and not the other way round. Appadurai paid special attention to what he calls “enclaved commodities,” which have very limited circulations and are customarily considered *sacred*, hence not commodifiable. Igor Kopytoff’s seminal essay in the same collection, “The Cultural Biography of Things” specifically examined the commodity status of African sculpture.

One of the social markers of the African trader in Côte d’Ivoire (and in much of West Africa) is his ambiguous status as one who is at the same time an insider and an outsider—African, yes, but not of the same culture that produces the artwork by which he makes his living. Almost always a Muslim, usually Hausa or Wolof, he emphatically distances himself from the masks and figures that are considered sacred by the Baule, Senufo, and other cultures who use them. To him (and it is always a “him”), they are “pieces of wood” that can be sold for money. Physically near yet culturally far, like Simmel’s stranger, the trader is free to turn spirit-imbed objects into highly marketable commodities.

At the same time, he is no stranger to other traders. Steiner describes their strong sense of ethnic loyalty, which undergirds the series of transactions running from rural villages to big city markets and excludes outsiders from participating in the exchanges except as consumers. In one transaction replete with denials, reversals, and intrigues, the author describes the purchase of two Senufo *kpédé* masks in Korhogo he witnessed while traveling upcountry with an Abidjan-based Hausa trader in 1988. (I’ll call him AHT.) These were the type of masks known by the traders as “copies” (made for sale) rather than *ancien* (“old,” purportedly used in ceremonies).

In the first stage of the transaction, the masks are sold by their rural Senufo carver to another Senufo, a trader who is traveling from village to village acquir-
Ge mask
(Guinea Coast,
Liberia/Côte d'Ivoire).
Artist unknown.
Wood, metal, fiber, cloth.
Early 20th century.
Reproduced with permission by the Baltimore Museum of Art; gift of Robert and Mary Cumming, Baltimore.
BMA 1984.83.
ing a store of such masks and figures. The trader then shows them (stage two) to an elderly Hausa trader (let's call him EHT)—a small-time businessman who also travels through northern villages on foot or motorbike gathering pieces to bring back to Korhogo, a well-known center for Senufo carving and the headquarters of at least a half-dozen wealthy Hausa merchants, who conduct the art trade with dealers in Abidjan. In stage three, EHT then brings AHT and the author to the Senufo trader, who after three hours of hard bargaining over the age, and hence market value, of the objects, agrees to sell them to AHT at one-fifth of his original asking price.

It isn't over yet. Stage four: back in Korhogo, Alhadji Usuman, one of the most powerful Hausa middlemen, is outraged to discover that EHT and AHT have cut him out of the deal, in violation of accepted procedure. While all the Hausa traders in the neighborhood are noisily berating poor AHT, the Senufo trader suddenly arrives with his older brother, who, proffering the money with a flourish, demands the carvings back—stage five. They refuse; a deal is a deal. He threatens to bring in the police. Instantly,
three things happen: the quarrel among the Hausa traders is forgotten, EHT announces that it is actually the American who is the real “owner” (thrusting the masks into Steiner’s hands to prove the point), and the Senufo brothers, seeing that it might be impolitic to involve the police in the American’s business, beg off, calling the whole thing an unfortunate misunderstanding. Off they go on their motorbikes.

One striking thing about this transaction is the elaborate logic that underlies it. But another is the highly contingent nature of the bargaining, the elaborate gamesmanship and the instantaneous reversals. It is a system at once highly structured and constantly open to play. Steiner likens it to “fission and fusion” in African kinship systems. But lest one imagine the trader network as a form of straightforward economic tribalism, he asserts that while ethnic loyalty plays heavily in the rural areas, it is actually much more complicated in the big city of Abidjan, where ties of friendship may outweigh those of ethnicity.

In reading this wonderfully complex account, I couldn’t help wondering what might have gone differently if the objects had not been “copies” made for sale but “authentic” masks, sold illicitly or stolen from their owners? As Patrick Geary remarked in The Social Life of Things, the theft of saintly relics only increased their value as commodities: “A corpse once stolen (or said to have been stolen) was valuable because it had been worth stealing.” The value of any sacred object is augmented in this process, so long as it retains its aura of authenticity in its new setting.

The most famous example of this in recent years was the case of the Cameroonian Afo-a-Kom (literally, the “Kom thing”), which also reveals the complicated issues involved in uncovering alleged theft when reputations are at stake. In 1973, while browsing an exhibition of African art at Dartmouth College, two
former Peace Corps volunteers recognized the Afo-a-Kom—a beaded male throne figure that they had last seen in Cameroon at the palace at Laikom—among the show's sculpture. The item was on loan from a prominent New York dealer. The New York Times, which had already that year given dramatic and detailed coverage to several instances of international art theft, pounced on the story. The investigative reporter was relentless (he would later write a book on the subject). Not wanting to miss a photo opportunity (or a chance to take the moral high ground), the U.S. State Department got into the act, eventually succeeding in returning the Afo-a-Kom to Laikom amid much ceremony and fanfare.

Only later was it discovered—with considerable embarrassment, and without being reported in the press—that the person most likely to have sold the piece, illicitly, in the first place was a member of the Kom royal family. (The usual route out of Cameroon would have been through Foumban, where Hausa traders similar to those in Korhogo supply objects from Cameroon and eastern Nigeria to dealers in Paris.) Paradoxically, then, the Afo-a-Kom's sojourn in the West—one might say its "commodity phase"—only increased its value, both on the art market and to the people of Kom. The publicity certainly increased its appraisal value: its name-recognition shot up after the New York Times investigation. And while to the Kom people themselves the Afo-a-Kom was considered an inalienable possession—something that could not be bought—it could only be more highly valued by virtue of having been taken from them and later recovered. If anything, its surreptitious removal and triumphant return were further proof of its power to resist human intervention in superhuman affairs.

* * *

It is not only unscrupulous locals who cooperate with traders and dealers. Researchers in art history and anthropology are also, however unwittingly, part of the problem. Igor Kopytoff writes knowingly of this in The Social Life of Things when he describes the rules by which academ-
ics a generation ago exempted themselves from concern for the commodification of African sculpture, even while collecting it during fieldwork. Because they didn’t sell it for profit, they believed themselves uninvolved in the process.

Four years ago I had the bizarre experience of walking into a famous collector’s home in Switzerland to find myself confronted by a large and elaborate Idoma mask that I immediately recognized as coming from the same village in central Nigeria where I had done extensive mask research years before (see illustration). The collector had recently purchased it from a reputable dealer in Paris. My dilemma, one shared by everybody who does this kind of research, is that it is the documentation and subsequent publication of pictures of these objects that allows dealers (in Paris or Foumban, it hardly matters) to send out “runners” to look for them—and, where possible, buy them. Had I helped create this situation, simply by writing about it? It’s a variation on a familiar question: how much is the storyteller responsible for the story’s interpretation?

I still don’t know whether the Idoma mask was actually stolen by an agent of one of the dealers, or whether the heavy toll of IMF Structural Adjustment Policies on the Nigerian economy (and the consequent impoverishment of the Idoma, along with other rural people) had made an offer of cash impossible to refuse. As the story of the Afo-a-Kom suggests, the issues have become more complicated. The need for cash is a more common reason than actual theft these days. The seller is typically someone young and disaffected enough to place the object’s exchange value above its ritual value, and therefore unlikely to be the object’s custodian. So we really are speaking of theft after all, but the thief is no longer the trader himself.

The dismaying thing is that we scholars of African art provide collectors with fresh ammunition every time we publish the outcome of our research. It’s a well-known fact that traders in Africa and dealers in the West make extensive use of our books and catalogs. Steiner’s text describes precisely how this works in Abidjan, where traders delight in showing customers catalog illustrations of masks or figures slightly inferior to the ones they happen to be selling. While in this case the catalog validates the traders’ product by comparison, illustrations also function as guidebooks, pure and simple.

As a graduate student in London, I was introduced to a youngish up-and-coming London dealer, a trained artist who, along with a fellow dealer in Paris, had already made one illegal field trip to Idoma—land—illegal because Nigeria has a strin-
gent Antiquities Law forbidding most exports. They were “looking forward to reading my dissertation,” which they clearly planned to use as a kind of Antiquities Trip-Tick when they went back again. Appalled and fascinated by the sheer hubris of what they regarded as a profitable adventure, I later tracked down the Parisian dealer and discovered that he held a Ph.D. in anthropology from the Sorbonne and considered what he was doing (buying masks and figures for about £5 each and reselling them for about £500 each) an extension of his “field-work,” complete with little black notebooks and tape recordings. Most Western dealers who claim to collect works in the “field” actually sit in a hotel in Douala or Abidjan for days, making deals with those traders from Foumban or Korhogo. My two interested dealers were an exception, in that they actually hoped to have some kind of validating experience along the way. But make no mistake: they were doing it for the money.

Ivoirian traders have their own terms to rate the exchange value of the goods they are selling, but for these to be useful, they must be roughly congruent with the classifications used by the world art market in which the traders operate. Hence their discourse of authenticity is immediately recognizable, a sliding scale on which old is good and new is bad, at least as far as money is concerned. Objects that appear to be old, that show signs of use, are “top,” or antiquités. Pieces made in traditional styles and genres expressly for the art market are “copies,” even if they don’t actually replicate any existing older piece. (They are often artificially aged.) And objects invented for the souvenir buyer (as opposed to the collector of antiquités) are known as nyama-nyama.

Among the assortment of objects that Steiner describes in this last category are masks and figures based loosely on traditional prototypes, such as the Asante akua'ba, but embellished (e.g., with inset
beads) and carved in a slightly different style, or on a different scale. These nyama-nyama are also called “Kenya” by the traders, to indicate a generic “African” rather than a specific “tribal” style. (In Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, located at the other end of the continent, sounds exotic; in Kenya, these “improved” objects are thought to come from Ghana, where the Asante prototype originates. Steiner claims they are actually made by Senegalese.) These are the items that turn up regularly on this side of the Atlantic in African American boutiques and street fairs—and perhaps more surprisingly, in museum shops from L.A. to Boston, Chicago to Atlanta.

Only a few “top” pieces make their way in traders’ suitcases from West and Central Africa to Nairobi, although the “copies” and poupees et masques Kenya are as ubiquitous there as in Abidjan. The few objects priced above $3,000 or $4,000 are brought there by a handful of itinerant West African traders, who understand the Kenya market to be a venue where the richest safari tourists gather—at Charleton Heston’s Mount Kenya Safari Club in Nanyuki, for example. Other potential clients for these pieces are high-level diplomats connected with the embassies and the United Nations, whose headquarters for Africa is located outside Nairobi. As elsewhere in formerly British Africa, local government and business elites rarely spend big money on art objects, preferring more conspicuous forms of public consumption such as houses and luxury cars. In this sense, they are very much the inheritors of the white colonial taste, even going so far as to prefer those very colonial visions of majestic elephants bursting through the bush to the homegrown imaginings of African artists.

But while it appears that educated Africans make the same assumptions about authenticity as Western dealers and collectors, Steiner found that this was not always the case with the Ivoirian traders. As one explained to him, “At the beginning, there was only one of everything that you now see in the marketplace. When the Europeans came, they took these things with them and put them in the museums and in the books. After that time, everything became a copy.” As Steiner points out, this locates the discourse of authenticity in a far-off place rather than in Africa: authentic objects, therefore, no longer exist, as they were removed from circulation long ago by the colonials. One would like to know a little more about this trader’s business. A trader who sells only “copies” would have an interest in propagating such a totalizing-dis-

**Tourists inspect art, Bamburi Beach, Kenya**
© Sidney L. Kasfir
course. On the other hand, you’d be very unlikely to hear it from a top-of-the-line trader trying to sell “antiquities” at a high price. From him one might expect to hear instead of undiscovered caches of authentic art hidden deep in the bush. (It is this kind of thinking, of course, that induces dealers like my friends in London and Paris to go collecting.)

In the only lapse in an otherwise very prescient book, the author begins with the assertion that “surprisingly little” has been said on the subject of authenticity in African art. In 1992 I published an article in the journal *African Arts* called “African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow,” which elicited twelve rather impassioned and sometimes prickly responses, including one by Steiner himself. As a result of the interest generated by this combined dialogue/diatribe, *African Arts* decided also to reprint its 1976 “authenticity issue” on fakes and fakery, which reproduces the range of scholarly opinion on the subject prior to the New Art History and the New Ethnography. Finally the *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* for 1993 devoted an article entitled “Exploding Canons” to the matter. The subject is at the heart of debates concerning canonicity, and has become a major annoyance for those who have a stake in denying the commodity status of African art, from the leading auction houses to museums of fine art.

Institutional criteria for determining the authenticity of African art veer between arguments about the object’s uniqueness, on the one hand, and its cultural embeddedness on the other. To make the grade under these conditions, an object must be demonstrably one-of-a-kind but also embedded in a tradition, and has to bear evidence of actual use, as opposed to having been made for the market. A work’s authenticity, then, is a function of its distance from the “commodity form.” Anthropology museums have less at stake in this argument (commodities are, after all, cultural artifacts, even if they’re not art), and some have even begun to concertedly collect “commodities.” But on balance, almost everyone prefers the “real thing.”

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this framing of what counts as *authentic*, which Steiner identifies with cultural brokerage, and which goes well beyond the transaction in Africa. It informs collecting practice back in Europe and the United States, and has a strong influence on what West-
ern publics perceive as art, as opposed to souvenir. It also influences cultural production, sometimes quite decisively, as when artists have no direct contact with their clientele. Finally, these traders and dealers, like their counterparts in New York or Paris, have the capacity to affirm or deny the commodity status of the objects that pass through their hands, and in doing so, confirm or deny their claims to distinction.

By now, there may be more people who have seen the associated film video *In and Out of Africa* (a collaboration between Chris Steiner and filmmakers Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor) than have read *African Art in Transit*. The film, following the fortunes of a single trader, pursues the vexing notion of authenticity as it is applied to African art by Western collectors, observing its deconstruction—or, better, demolition—by pragmatic African traders and African intellectuals. It follows one typical trader from the loading of his container in Abidjan with an assortment of “copies,” souvenirs, and crafts (all dumped inside unceremoniously, and without benefit of bubble wrap) to his cramped hotel room in New York (a place patronized by many traders), to his transactions out of the back of a rented van with a dealer on Long Island. Americans tend to be impatient at clinching deals and don’t have the time or the skills to practice the art of bargaining the way it is practiced in Africa. Unlike in Ko rhogo, the transaction time is measurable in minutes instead of hours, and the Long Island dealer doesn’t seem to mind that she is being overcharged. She’ll just pass it along to her affluent suburban clients.

The best part of the film consists of interviews with West African intellectuals and European and American collectors and dealers. The latter uphold in varying ways the inviolable standards of authenticity, which are mirrored in the discourse of the traders: use, age, traditional craftsmanship, and so on. The African intellectuals, on the other hand—one an Ivoirian painter and writer, Wewere Liking, and the other the director of the National Museum in Abidjan—insist that authenticity is a Western problem, not an African one. Why, she asks, shouldn’t an artist be able to sell his work? In what way does that render it inauthentic? The question serves to locate the authenticity question unambiguously in collecting practice. It is not an artist’s question. It can only arise at a considerable cultural distance from the scene of production, whether voiced by a Muslim trader or a department head at Christie’s.

**Why shouldn’t an African artist be able to sell his work? In what way does that render it inauthentic?**

One might say that the film is so successful in making its point that it is almost misleading. I once saw it with an audience of anthropologists, nearly all of whom specialized in Native American arts and knew very little about Africa in the 1990s. After seeing *In and Out of Africa*, those with whom I spoke had concluded that all African art has now been successfully commodified, and that “traditional” art, as a class of objects made
and used exclusively within an African community, must now be a thing of the past. This is, of course, not the case; the two conditions coexist and interrelate in complicated ways. That this dialectic is not the subject of either the book or the film does nothing to detract from either. But I do think that the next important study in this field will be one that takes this interplay into account. In doing so, it will shift the focus back toward the producers of African art and their relation to traders and dealers, rather than the brokerage between traders and buyers. This, then, is the other half of a very complex equation.