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A new generation of American sculptors has emerged from the shadow of Minimalism by reinventing the syntax of their medium.

On Two Dubious Caravaggios by Carter Ratcliff
In which the author argues that the Madrid David and the Rome Narcissus are Caravaggiosque but not by Caravaggio.

Hockney, Center Stage by Kenneth E. Silver
Pasticheur extraordinaire, David Hockney quotes from such masters as Picasso, Hogarth and Matisse in his defiantly theatrical stage designs.

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Editor: Elizabeth C. Baker
ism, completed Albright's devastating bombing run on most of the art struggling through the pass after Clifford Still and the Beat Generation. Bay Area art, Albright concludes, has gone straight to hell in a handbasket.

Some of the severity of Albright's verdict, implicit throughout though he seldom voices it in so many words, may be inadvertent. The book proceeds temperamentally downhill as Albright, sliding slowly into contemporaneity with the artists under discussion, loses historical perspective. He labors conspicuously and awkwardly to find something nice to say about the current work of such artists as Wally Hedrick, Jay de Feo and George Herms, who peaked in the '50s and '60s. And he devotes entirely too much space to lesser artists like Marioni (a sentimental favorite for his contributions to the scene rather than for the art he's fashioned) and somebody named Wilfried Sätt, an eighth-rate Max Ernst who concocted "visionary" collages that suggest the title crawls to "Monty Python."

Perhaps the most damaging—but unintentional—of Albright's revelations about Bay Area art is that it is, by and large, a history of teaching jobs. Almost every artist worth indexing is or was a hands-on classroom guru in one of the score of art schools, colleges and junior colleges dotting the Bay Area like youth hostels in Luxembourg. The San Francisco Art Institute (née the California School of Fine Arts) dominates, with the University of California campuses at Berkeley and Davis running a close second and third in the sanctuary race. Maybe the abundance of teaching jobs from the shores of Stinson Beach to the flatlands of San Jose—and not fog, coffee houses, cannabis or music from "the hearts of space"—accounts for the flaccidity of most Bay Area art. On my bookshelf, the complete story could be told only in a three-volume set: Golden Gate, Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1946-80, and a scholarly sociological tome, The Painterly Pedagogue: The Influence of Teaching Jobs on the Quality of Art in Northern California.

1. Albright's book "served as the basis for an exhibition in the Great Hall of the Oakland Museum, June 15-Aug. 18, 1985," but in this case the show rose from the book.

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Peter Plagens

**Afro-American Art**


Flash of the Spirit is a work of passion. In it, Robert Farris Thompson, professor of art history at Yale, treats a subject largely neglected by the academy: the transmission of certain vital cultural and artistic traditions of Africa to the New World, where they were elevated to the status of centerpieces in the popular culture of New World societies. Specifically, Flash seeks to illustrate the continuities between the ritual arts of four societies of Central and West Africa—the Yoruba, Kongo, Mande and Eojahm peoples—and the cultural forms displayed in the African diaspora from Brazil to the American South.

The book is divided into five chapters. In four of them, Thompson describes the artistic products and philosophies of the four African peoples, using them as a lens to explore relationships to New World objects and philosophies. In his third chapter, on Haiti, he reverses this procedure and first examines vodun (voodoo) objects to discover how influences from different African cultures have contributed to this elaborate New World religion. Though his choice of the four African cultures for comparison with Afro-American and Caribbean cultures is supported by historical research that identifies the demographic concentrations of specific African groups transported as slaves to the New World, Thompson attempts to go beyond accepted generalizations to explore specific trans-Atlantic connections as displayed in the visual arts and their performative contexts.

This is a subversive project. Thompson rejects the connoisseur's contemplative approach to objects, demanding instead that his readers engage in a more active means of understanding art. Surely Thompson is the most anthropological of Africanist art historians, if we take anthropology to be not a body of data but a perspective which attempts "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world," as Malinowski described the anthropological imagination in a famous passage. By attempting to experience objects in the way they were intended to be seen and understood by the people for whom they were made, Thompson strives to take African art out of the museum and to associate Afro-American and Caribbean art not with high culture and refined esthetics but with popular culture and the esthetics of resistance and survival, which he in turn relates to minority status and oppression. *Rolling Stone* (Nov. 22, '84) acknowledged this objective when it gave its imprint to Thompson as a self-styled practitioner of "guerrilla scholarship."

Thompson is at his best when providing precise analyses of the form and iconography of specific objects in the African context and their subsequent transformation in the New World. In his most successful comparisons, he couples formal analysis with informants' interpretations and linguistic and historical evidence. This information then provides the background that supports the internal evidence of the objects themselves.

For example, his comparison of a Yoruba fan created for rituals associated with the sea goddess Are with one made for the Cuban Yoruba-derived sea goddess Yemayá easily establishes formal and iconographical continuities between these two Old and New World art forms. Both fans are round and decorated with white cowrie shells, once the Yoruban coinage and now a symbol of wealth. The Cuban example carries additional embellishments of bells and feathers, which in the Yoruban system are associated respectively with the sound of water and with witchcraft. Thompson analyzes a second fan which combines the Yoruba-derived fan form with iconographical references to the Virgin of Sorrows. Produced in Río, this fan is made of hammered white metal; its handle is the shaft of an arrow whose point pierces the bottom of a central heart motif—an emblem of the Virgin. A hymn sung during the festival in which this fan is used also refers to the Virgin as "reigning monarch of the seas." The fan form and the song text thus establish the fusion of two distinct religious personages—the African sea goddess and the Virgin of Sorrows—within the Macumba religion of Brazil.

Unhappily, in Flash of the Spirit such successful comparisons appear infrequently among pages of failed speculation. Thompson's project is flawed by three related errors he makes over and over again in this book. First, he assumes that objects carry their meanings from one historical setting to another. Thus, he fails to ask how the meanings attributed to New World adaptations of African art forms are changed by their creators. In an analysis of staffs—one made in Nigeriar Yorubaland at the end of the last century, the other in New York within the last 30 years—Thompson demonstrates connections between Old and New World cults of the herbalist deity Osanin. The Yoruba staff is constructed of iron; conical bells are attached to its middle portion. A flat disc surmounts the staff, and a bird described by the Yoruba as a vulture is poised on the disc. The New York cult staff retains the basic Yoruba form but substitutes a cup for the flat disc, a weather-vane cock for the vulture, and small, machine-made jingle bells for the iron conical bells. The staff form has been creolized, but Thompson neglects to ask what changes have occurred in its meaning.

In his discussion of Yoruba iconography Thompson produces evidence to support his interpretation of the Yoruban vulture as a symbol diversely associated with the head, destiny, sorcery and witchcraft. But the New York staff has no vulture; it has been replaced by a rooster. The Yoruba, in common with most other people in the world, attribute quite different meanings to these two birds. Surprisingly, Thompson neglects to describe how the New York adherents of the Osanin cult interpret the rooster, how this interpretation differs from its Yoruba prototype, or how this
iconographical transformation alters the interpretation of Osanyin.

A second flaw is his consistent misinterpretation of African systems of thought, and his subsequent projection of these misinterpretations onto New World art. In his chapter on the Mande, Thompson shows that the narrow-band of textiles characteristic of West African weaving survived as a preferred textile type in the New World. (For example, the narrow-strip weaving tradition in northeast Brazil shows strong technological similarities to the African tradition.) Yet Thompson includes only those African textiles with asymmetrical and irregular patternning, thus suggesting that all textiles produced by Mande peoples are designed in this manner. In fact, many Mande textiles exhibit regularity and symmetry, and are equally admired by their makers. One design orientation does not preclude the other, nor is one preferred over the other. Irregularities in patternning are an embodiment of the Mande concept of fadengya, which is used metaphorically in discussions of competition, rivalry, individuality and heroic behavior. While Thompson describes this term well, he fails to explain that fadengya is invoked only in relationship to badenya, its complement, a concept associated with notions of community, social solidarity, continuity and group endeavor. One of these orientational concepts may be emphasized in any particular context but only in implied contrast to the other.

Thompson imposed the same false hierarchy on Mande aesthetic concepts. Of a different cultural order but parallel in structure to the fadengya/badenya framework are two aesthetic terms which the Mande apply to discussions of objects or events. Dibi and jayan can be translated as "obscurity" and "clarity." According to the Mande, the form and design of objects which we categorize as art products (i.e., textiles, masks, statues, etc.) can either be intentionally obscure, ambiguous, unknowable or the reverse. Just as different Mande textiles may exhibit irregular and regular design motifs, so Mande masks and statues can be either amorphous and iconographically obscure or clear in both form and meaning.

Thompson's misinterpretation of the Mande view as hierarchical leads him to a false explanation of the high value which Afro-Americans place on irregularity and asymmetry in New World textile design.

*Flash* is marred by a third fallacy: Thompson infers shared cultural attitudes and beliefs between widely separated African and New World societies on the basis of superficial resemblances. The attempt to trace connections between societies as they are manifested in cultural forms requires a serious consideration of social history and contextual meaning. This formidable task calls on the skills of an art historian, anthropologist, linguist and historian. While Thompson draws from all of these fields, his application of their methodologies is unsystematic. In particular, he fails to recognize that the cognitive resources that are drawn upon in the production and appreciation of art can be found in cultures unconnected in time and space. (In Lévi-Strauss's analysis of split representation in Chinese, Northwest Coast Indian and Moari art, he explicitly cautions against accepting similar formal manifestations as the sole evidence for the historical diffusion of shared cognitive principles.) That Thompson finds similar artistic patterns in both New World and African cultures provides no secure evidence that there is a historical connection between them.

Thompson's discussion of "bottle trees" provides a telling example of the dangers inherent in his style of argumentation. Referring to a 1776 French account, he describes Kongo and Angola traditions of garlanding trees with reflective objects for the purpose of protecting households "through invocation of the dead"—but he neglects to ask why bottles in particular are used for this purpose. (We suspect that their reflectiveness, rather than their shape, is the important element in their use as representations; different reflective materials are used for similar reasons in many other cultures in Africa and around the world.) Thompson then cites a 1791 English description of a similar usage and meaning of bottle trees in the Caribbean island of Dominica. He makes a good case for historical connections between the African and Caribbean populations and their cultures. But then, without stated evidence of further connections, we are quickly transported from the 18th-century Caribbean to bottle trees in the contemporary western and southern United States.

As if this were not sufficient, a footnote tells us that bottle trees are found in the Southern Sudan among the Bongo and Moru peoples. This is taken as evidence of possible connections between East Africa and the Kongo, "revealing myriad possibilities of massive reinforcement of the tradition in the Black New World!" Finally, Thompson finds the same meanings expressed in the architectural collage of Henry Dorsey (1807-1973) in Brownsboro, Kentucky:

A doll on a horse on a stafflike metal stem appears to gallop through the branches of a tree, with a stray tire, hung on other branches, as on a bottle tree. Henry Dorsey may never have heard of Mbanza Kongo or Loango—he did not have to. I suggest that he was their progeny by virtue of the culturally open and responsive spirit of his imagination.

Perhaps. But what is the evidence that these particular cultures and different artists derived their products from the same historical sources? We think it more reasonable to argue that Henry Dorsey and the other African-American artists that Thompson discusses have drawn their inspiration from a multitude of sources and are far more creative and original than he recognizes in his celebration of African culture. If Afro-American culture is less tenacious than Thompson imagines, then its people are more imaginative than he is willing to grant.

We don't deny that there are definite African retentions in the artistic forms created in the New World. However, in its analysis of these connections, *Flash of the Spirit* is a curious amalgam of insights and unsubstantiated assertions. Thompson's image of African and Afro-American cultures is composed of equal parts of respect and romanticism. As a result, Thompson casts the differences between exotic and Western culture in the wrong terms—between an exotic "flash of the spirit" and a Western rational mind-set. There is no evidence that rationality is the privileged field of Western culture, as Thompson suggests in his preface, or that emotive and imaginative forces are the distinguishing features of African and Afro-American cultures. Because he lacks appreciation for hard, historical facts such as the "accidents of class, status and political oppression," he is unable fully to account for the effects of changing social environments on the productions of art, or for the different ways in which people have interpreted their histories through art.

Perhaps this is why Thompson's descriptions of African and Afro-American cultures make their members seem so alike, and their societies so lacking in diversity. This is most evident in his examination of the key relationship between African art and philosophy. In Thompson's view all Africans are priests and priestesses and all African action embodies the wisdom of the elders. For him every African is both an artist and a philosopher.

Yet African societies, like our own, have specialists and laity, esoteric and everyday systems of knowledge. Many Africans have as little understanding of the principles of divination as we have of the workings of the computer. The idea that African cultures embody an "ethnophilosophy" that is intuitively known and felt by all Africans has increasingly been criticized by African scholars themselves. Undoubtedly, different cultures organize their thought and their art in terms of different notions of being, as Thompson asserts. But this assertion should not absolve him from the responsibility of describing different systems of thought adequately or of relating them concretely to the world in which they emerge.

Special thanks to T.O. Beidelman, Kris Hardin and Adrienne Kaseppler for their gracious criticism.

3. Readers of *Art in America* can readily appreciate the importance of Thompson's voice and the challenge to decontextualized esthetics he presents by reading James Clifford's and Yve-Alain Bois' reviews of the Museum of Modern Art's recent "Primitivism" show (A.A.A., Apr. '85) and co-curator Kirk Varnes deo's ferocious response to accusations of elitism in the following issue (A.A.A., May '85).
Myth and Reality, Stein pushed against the limits of printmaking smooth boulevards, clean cars, and a breezy shop, stood prominently out. Through its modernism, Californians who'd distinguished themselves in local skirmishes. In an atmosphere reminiscent of the time: If the names are big enough, the artist's self-description) "one of its most...well, poetry, than anybody else:

After a while + the resistance a desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something like yielding with its only message a design for New York artists who need to bolster the lower end of their price ranges. He makes Gemini print on mylar and chiffon, requires that it register stones to make a seven-foot lithograph, sends it to India and China, and he does it all with more...well, poetry, than anybody else:


Art of this century does not so much imitate life as it does industry. In Hapsburg Europe, where besotted workers would emerge from the factories for Sundays in the park with their pinafored families, artists in dark, overfurnished rooms stuffed with Orientalia daubed luminous pats of paint on small canvases, attempting to create little universes of sunshine. In bustling, baggy-trousered postwar New York, where hordes of office workers in snap-brim hats or high heels spilled into the avenues of commerce, artists in converted sweatshops flung the sparks of their angst at oversized canvases. And in the dreamy haze of 1960s Los Angeles, where industry took the forms of aviation and movies, artists frosted the windows of their storefronts and, inside, lovingly laminated the layers of their translucent homages to the beach. It was a time of smooth boulevards, clean cars, and a breezy cultural optimism that whispered the promise of a place in the museum for any art object kept dustless and secure with countersunk Phillips-head screws.

Among the stuccoed temples to the notion that art's future was to be found in the stylized anonymity of West Hollywood, Gemini, G.E.L., the first and most successful of the commercial children of the Tamarind Workshop, stood prominently out. Through its modest portals passed the heroes of the most recent New York art wars (this time fought to break the shackles of high culture, to liberate hamburgers, soup cans and comic book girts from their un-American neglect), plus a few Californians who'd distinguished themselves in local skirmishes. In an atmosphere reminiscent of a fanatical sports-car garage where the boys in coveralls chrome every nut on an Aston Martin DB-4 and the floor is swept as clean as a jai-alai court at the close of each day, artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Sam Francis, precise-but-flexible artisan printers, office staff and entrepreneurs Ken Tyler, Sid Felsen and Stanley Grinstein pushed against the limits of printmaking by fabricating some of the most fastidious works of art the western Western world had ever seen.

Gemini G.E.L.: Art and Collaboration, a volume to rival in elegance the products of its subject, is a monument, for better or worse, to the confluence of California and the culture factory. In spite of Bruce Davis's short prologue on "Print Workshops at Mid-Century," and the historical and esthetic context provided by Ruth E. Fine in the main essay, the thrust of the book is technical, and its tone that of a brochure telling the prospective owner of that Aston Martin what his money is buying:

The doors for the project were ordered through a local Datsun dealer. "There're about a hundred parts in one of those car doors, and they arrive in parts, so I went down (to the dealer) one day and they trained me to put one together. We always wondered if we messed up the (Datsun) computer in Japan;...suddenly they were shipping lots of left front doors..." [p. 85].

The Hawthorne of Larroque paper was made especially for Motherwell and each sheet is watermarked with his initials [p. 89].

Ritt noted that Preview, which required eleven press runs during the proofing session, at times required more than twice that number to maintain consistency during the printing of the edition because of changes in the ink and the atmosphere [p. 113, fn. 1].

That this language bears the scent of retroactive advertising is only partly due to the fact that Art and Collaboration was a grand catalogue for the big Gemini show at the National Gallery of Art (Nov. 18, 1984-Feb. 24, 1986) and, consequently, its analysis of the enterprise as a whole is, shall we say, friendly. For the most part, the book accurately reflects the mentality of Gemini, of Southern California, of the time: If the names are big enough, the crew dedicated enough, the supplies costly enough, and the labor lengthy, what comes out must be not only art, not only good art, but visionary art. It is the aerospace industry writ small.

Gemini, of course, was not making rockets to the moon, but art. And art, however industrialized, requires soul. From Art and Collaboration and from my own encounters with the spawn of Gemini, it appears that this ineffable quality was supplied in the main by (to quote the artist's self-description) "one of its most outstanding foreign randy virgin whores for the sake of art with love," Robert Rauschenberg. In a sense, Rauschenberg is Gemini; he exploits it, manipulates it, goads it, and bullies it into becoming more than an L.A. hideaway for New York artists who need to bolster the lower end of their price ranges. He makes Gemini print on mylar and chiffon, requires that it register stones to make a seven-foot lithograph, sends it to India and China, and he does it all with more...well, poetry, than anybody else:

After a while + the resistance a desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something like yielding with its only message a design for New York artists who need to bolster the lower end of their price ranges. He makes Gemini print on mylar and chiffon, requires that it register stones to make a seven-foot lithograph, sends it to India and China, and he does it all with more...well, poetry, than anybody else:

Gemini is an undoubted triumph: Within its confines, Jasper Johns has made the best pure prints of the 20th century, Roy Lichtenstein has found his true medium (against his prints, all but the earliest paintings look like lead balloons), and Claes Oldenburg has composed perhaps because what the artists are up to now (e.g., Michael Heizer's search for an earthwork site in Switzerland) isn't translatable into prints without indulging in art-souvenirism, or perhaps because the invitees to Gemini simply aren't as good as they used to be (Jonathan Borofsky's I dreamed I was having my photograph taken, etc., is an image in no way deserving of a sheet of paper almost 100 inches across or a centerfold reproduction in this book).

No one wishes a venture of this sort ill, and I hope Gemini manages, after its first 20 years, to find a new groove to take it into the next 20. But for the time being it appears that continuing the practice of plucking names from the top of the art hit parade and jetting them to California for a little technological carte blanche will no longer produce anything but sales. I also hope that while this changeover occurs another book on Gemini and its brethren will be written—one that really digs into how the marketing of signatures in the 1960s and 70s affected the overheated art world of the 1980s.

—Peter Plagens

Contributors

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