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A UNIVERSAL SPIRITUALITY IN PRIMITIVISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ART OFJANICE GORDON

By

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ABSTRACT

A UNIVERSAL SPIRITUALITY IN PRIMITIVISM:
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Art historians have placed much emphasis on primitivism in the twentieth century by discussing the presence of formal affinities between tribal and modern art. I feel that conceptual affinities are also present and may be closer, but have not been investigated to the same extent.

In the following paper I propose to examine this thesis by contrasting the spiritual forces in the work of a contemporary Western artist, Janice Gordon, to those in African sculpture. I review two major sources on the topic by Goldwater and Rubin, examine critics' opinions of the 1984 MOMA *Primitivism* exhibition, interview Janice Gordon, and compare her work to African art.

Janice Gordon's assemblages appear to have affinities with African sculpture in that both deal with the transformation of materials into a spiritual realm. I conclude that the affinities may arise inevitably from human impulses that occur in all people and therefore in all cultures.

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Introduction

As a contemporary artist who has lived and taught in Africa, I am particularly interested in the topic of primitivism in modern art. In 1965 via a Ford grant I spent a year teaching art at Cuttington College in the forests of Liberia. The experience was not only enriching, but left me with a deep connection to the peoples of Africa.

About a decade later I pursued an advanced degree in printmaking and was drawn back thematically to the culture that had left an indelible impression on my life. The mystique of African cultures kept resurfacing. Now, once again, I find myself trying to understand the mysteries of tribal culture and how that culture relates to my own.

As a contemporary artist, I also have a love and knowledge of Western contemporary art. When I entered graduate school in Art History, I decided that I would concentrate on the two subject areas of primary interest to me, African art and contemporary art. The idea of primitivism in modern art was a topic that intrigued me from the very beginning. I took seminars, researched, and wrote papers dealing with the issue. I soon discovered the topic was complex, highly controversial, and overwhelmingly broad in scope. I then needed to narrow the thesis into something more focused. While searching for a way to specify my ideas, I discovered the work of Janice Gordon, a contemporary artist who seemed to exemplify many affinities to traditional African art. I decided to find out why and how by researching this artist as the basis for my thesis. Her

work appeared to fill a void that the readings had exposed. Most of the discussion on affinities to tribal and modern art had concentrated on the formal aspects rather than the conceptual. The conceptual needed to be addressed as well. While getting to know more about this artist's work, I ultimately realized that the conceptual affinities between her work and tribal art were of a universal spiritual nature. In the following paper, I propose to elucidate the nature of those universal spiritual affinities and their role in furthering our understanding of primitivism.

I first heard of Janice Gordon when I was visiting the University of Michigan Museum of Art in the fall of 1992. Her exhibition *Recent Constructions* was on display. As I viewed her sculptures, I became more and more mesmerized by the works. I had already decided to write about the broader topic of "primitivism" in relation to modern art, and realized that Gordon's work might serve as a way to define a more specific topic for my thesis. I began to perceive the affinities between Gordon's work and that of tribal cultures. At first I was not exactly sure what those affinities were. There was an obvious similarity in the use of natural found objects, but what else?

I eventually realized that the affinities between Gordon's art and tribal art are both formal and conceptual. The transformation of the physical materials into a spiritual concept occurs in both domains and appears to arise from basic human instincts generated by the need to communicate and survive.

A number of art historians in the last decade have discussed and debated the topic of primitivism in modern art. The impetus for

this debate was the Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1984 called *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.* One of the problems that several critics had with the exhibition concerned the idea of attributed affinities: the tendency of some art historians, in search of innovative approaches to comparing subjects, to imply influences that may or may not exist. Although the MOMA exhibition was visually and academically comprehensive, it did not encompass much research or inform the viewer about the ethnography of the tribal cultures or their art. The non-Western art was not discussed or considered with regard to context. Even though context is an integral part of the end product of any work of art, the cultures that produced these examples were virtually ignored. The exhibition primarily dealt with aesthetics and formal comparisons from a Western vantage point. It may be difficult to understand other cultures so removed from one's own, but the attempt should still be made. The implication that tribal art is inferior or undeserving often prevails when art historians simply try to maintain a superior or imperialistic attitude.

Despite all the negative associations traditionally connected to tribal societies, Westerners have often deeply longed to recapture a quality present in tribal art, a quality that seemingly dissipates in industrialized societies. For centuries artists have been attracted to a simpler, more basic approach to the making of art. What is the ingredient that industrialized nations lack? Can we define it? Can we recapture it?

Carl Jung spoke of archetypes derived from mankind's original nature. The instinctive aspect of the human psyche is often

overwhelmed by the rational side. When science takes over, human beings become disinvolved with nature. They lose their emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena and are no longer in touch with the spiritual. Everything must have a rational explanation. In contrast, tribal cultures deal with the unexplainable in terms of spirits. They are comfortable with the occult. (Jung Man 95)

Janice Gordon does not identify consciously with primitivism or with any particular tribal culture, but she does admit to a sense of longing and an element of transformation in her art that to me very closely relate to tribal art and to its deeper, more spiritual nature. I will attempt to show the conceptual similarities between tribal art and Gordon's. Once the affinities are established, I will then try to determine whether there is any direct influence or if the impulse is independent, and perhaps indicates a universal human attribute.

Even though the basis for the art of different cultures may vary, the style and function of art are usually deeply seated within its culture. In the twentieth century, commercial interests have often provided the impetus for Western societies' art, whereas the art of tribal societies often deals with a need to maintain social order. More recently, content has become an impetus in Western contemporary art as well. Janice Gordon's use of metaphor and narrative causes her art, like much non-Western art, to exist on many levels beyond the formal. The aesthetic is no longer its primary *raison d'être.* To realize the original meaning in any of her work, the viewer must have a common basis of understanding and

pertinent information. The formal qualities are significant, but are not the sole purpose of her art.

An affinity might be pure coincidence or the result of direct influence. These relationships and comparisons need not lead to the conclusion that Western art is central to all art. For centuries the relationship of art to the past has determined its value. Other cultures may influence the current art scene but never effect more than minor stylistic changes. It seems that the real influence or affinity between primitivism and contemporary art exists on a level beyond the formalistic. It extends into the spiritual world. Writers may ignore conceptual affinities because ideas are indirect. It is more difficult to provide non-visual answers to the question of why art throughout the world is similar, but it appears to be relevant to today's thinking. Today's artists are frequently concerned with issues, content, the spiritual, and narrative -- often without specific references to the past. I will attempt in the following paper to place Janice Gordon within the context of the concepts and issues associated with the primitivism debate.

What is the connection of modern Western artists to "primitivism"? What has already been written on the topic of primitivism as it relates to modern art? What has the reaction been to these writings? Can a contemporary Western artist exhibit affinities to a non-Western culture? Are these affinities coincidental, or only part of a collective unconscious that causes all human beings to think in similar ways?

I will endeavor to deal with these questions in the following chapters. In the first chapter I will set a framework for analyzing

Janice Gordon's work by providing an overview of writings dealing with the topic of "primitivism in modern art" that pertain specifically to issues relevant to Gordon's work. This chapter will serve as an historical base for subsequent discussion.

Chapter 1. An Overview of Primitivism.

Primitivism often relates to tribal cultures. Unfortunately, the word "primitive" carries with it negative connotations. For example, one set of definitions for "primitive" includes the following:

1. Lack of education or knowledge. **ignorant, backward, unenlightened**
2. Lack of expert, careful craftsmanship. **raw, rough, crude, rude, unpolished**
3. Not civilized. **wild, savage, rude, barbaric, uncivilized, uncultivated** (The American Heritage Electronic Dictionary)

Obviously, the above definitions are extremely negative in character and often bias discussion of the tribal arts.

In search of a more appropriate term, writers have found replacements that are also often problematic. Some other terms with equally pejorative meanings include "marginal," "underdeveloped," '"minority," "otherness." Alternatives such as "tribal," "indigenous," "other," "small-scale societies," and "ethnographic" do not entirely escape the critical view. Likewise, references to industrialized nations as "sophisticated," "developed," and "civilized" imply that the non-Western culture is inferior by comparison. A dichotomy is set up with the terminology exemplifying the two traditions.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discover an appropriate term to describe these cultures. I, however, find it disturbing to have people react so negatively to the word "primitivism," when, for

me, it holds a very wonderful, mysterious association. Like some other writers (Rubin "Introduction" 74), I generally use "tribal" rather than "primitive" to describe African, Oceanic and other non-Western cultures. When I use "primitive" or "primitivism" it is only in the most positive sense, as in those definitions of "primitive" that refer to a gut-level sensitivity. I prefer to concentrate on the definitions that I believe have been associated with the term as it relates to art. The following are a second set of definitions that better describe "primitive" in the context of this paper:

4. Not derived from something else. **original, primary, prime**
5. Of or being an irreducible element. **basic, essential, ultimate, fundamental, elementary, underlying**
6. Of, existing, or occurring in a distant period. **early, ancient, primordial** (The American Heritage Electronic Dictionary)

Although it is not completely possible to separate the aesthetic from the conceptual, I will concentrate primarily on spiritual rather than formal affinities. There are few examples of art from any culture that do not integrally relate both, even when the function of art becomes part of the piece. Whether the object is meant to be pondered, sat on, or responded to, it ultimately must involve aesthetics in order to be considered art. Western cultures value art for its formal attributes, but many cultures do not consider their objects as "art" even though they may have the same qualities.

In this chapter I will compare Robert Goldwater's seminal book *Primitivism in Modern Art*[1] and the catalog for the 1984 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, *"Primitivism" in the 20th Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* edited by William Rubin. These two works focus on the topic of primitivism and modern art and explore the relationship between Western and tribal arts. It is unlikely that either author had any idea of the polemics that their books would stimulate. Each author dealt with the topic from his own Western perspective. The introduction written by Rubin served as a basis for much art historical debate.[2] Rubin referred to Goldwater's "primer" on the topic as "indispensable," but felt a redress was long overdue. Rubin places great significance on Picasso's instrumental role and his painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which opened the door to the inclusion of African art within modern. The painting was not discovered until after Goldwater's book was first published.

I primarily am interested in how their discussions provide a backdrop for issues that Janice Gordon examines in her work and how she can be viewed as part of the larger picture. Does she fit into the historic framework of "primitivism in modern art"?

Goldwater's book describes the art of Europe from the late ninteenth through the first half of the twentieth century. He discusses various artists and groups that felt an attraction to the

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[1] William Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* was published in 1938. Later he revised and amplified it to be published in 1967 under a new title, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books).

[2] In Chapter 2 I discuss several of the articles that were a reaction to the exhibit. They criticize a number of issues but mainly lack of context and documentation of the tribal that resulted in unfounded affinities.

art of non-Western cultures, primarily Africa and Oceania. Since the relationships Goldwater describes are mostly conceptual, they are closer to the affinities present in my thesis. The content is comprehensive on the topic and his conclusions seem in the final analysis to be definitive.

Rubin, Director of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, co-directed the exhibit with Kirk Varnedoe and edited its catalog. The exhaustive exhibition and the catalog were impressive. The catalog was important as a learned publication with essays by fifteen scholars, including lengthy essays from Rubin and Varnedoe. The book is impressive in size, selection of authors, and aesthetically. It contains over one thousand illustrations with 378 in color. It does not, however, offer much that is new on the subject of where the true affinities between tribal art and modern art lie.

In Rubin's introduction, he states that the purpose of the exhibition was to try "to understand Primitive sculptures in terms of the Western context in which modern artists 'discovered' them." (1) Not totally pleased with the negative connotations of the term "primitivism," Rubin usually chose to substitute the word "tribal."

Conversely, Goldwater concludes his book and findings with his definition of primitivism. He compiles his findings as traits common to all the groups of artists he discusses. He divides them into two general types: those dealing with "internal psychological factors" related to the human experience and those involving the elements of formal stylistic discernment. (255) The primitive (or tribal) can influence primitivism, but its characteristics may be

instincts common to all mankind. This supports my thesis of primitivism as a universal impulse. Even though there may sometimes be direct borrowings, the two can also exist separately and exclusively. (271)

As he discusses the various historical interpretations, Rubin shows a shift from a wider scope to one directed toward objects. The increase in artists (e.g., Picasso, Brancusi, Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck) as collectors of tribal objects generated this trend. Their acquisitions were not always the best examples in terms of quality or representativeness of the tribal. However, as Picasso noted in the now famous quote repeated by Rubin, "You don't need the masterpiece to get the idea." (Rubin "Introduction" 14) Rubin criticizes Goldwater's conservative views[3] in regard to direct formal influence.

Although the affinities Goldwater discussed were mostly conceptual, he did point out a number of stylistic similarities that he saw as tribal influences on the changing European art scene. The first half of Goldwater's book deals primarily with the indirect influence of tribal cultures, which the artists he writes about seem to acknowledge freely. In his discussion of direct influence, however, the artists such as Picasso and Brancusi deny that they borrow from the primitive. (144) The denial seems to stem from the artists' fear of appearing to lack originality. Even though their art differed in important respects from the tribal, most artists

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[3] Goldwater puts less emphasis on direct influence of "primitive forms." He stressed the tribal effect on the psychological and conceptual.

would not admit any direct copying. It is doubtful that the artists would object to the attribution of conceptual affinities, however.

The types of influence Rubin discusses are invisible, direct, and speculative affinities. Artists rarely admitted direct influences, but instead they incorporated them into a modern format where they often became "invisible." An artist would consciously or unconsciously assimilate the tribal objects he had viewed into an unrecognizable rendition through reinterpretation. (Rubin "Introduction" 18) Rubin refines and updates the ideas previously established by Goldwater, but Rubin concentrates on the formal qualities.

Because the artists of both Western and tribal traditions might never encounter each other or their art, an affinity might not always imply an influence. An affinity may just suggest attributes that are similar but not derivative. Artists of all generations and other cultures may feel an "aesthetic impulse" that has little to do with their background or training. The works may resemble each other stylistically but be far apart in meaning. (Rubin "Introduction" 28)

Speculative affinities came about because of the poor examples of tribal art assembled by the dealers and collectors. These representations caused artists to misinterpret meanings and produce "creative misreadings." Modern artists who have come in contact with tribal art often hypothesize affinities for which they have little documentation. They interpret these objects as they please. (Rubin "Introduction" 32) Whether stylistic or conceptual interpretations, the similarities may have little to do with the

original artist's intent. With these misinterpretations comes the flaw of "negative selection." That is, a modern artist may not realize that a tribal object is a poor example or a copy of an original, or is nonrepresentative, because it is all that is available. (Rubin "Introduction" 21)

Rubin finds affinities in ritual rather than narratives. The African art leans more toward ritual, the "iconic," and the abstract. Oceanic art depends more heavily on narrative and myth for its expression. A Modernist parallel is seen in the affinities between Surrealism and Oceanic art, and in the Cubist affinities to African art. (Rubin "Introduction" 55) Gordon's art contains ritual, narrative and myth.

Rubin ends his introductory chapter by stating that he feels the exhibition and catalog will help Western cultures become more familiar with "masterpieces from other cultures" and achieve a better understanding of humanity. They will make the Westerner aware of similarities or affinities that previously were unknown. Art can be the way to bring cultures closer together. (73) In my opinion, however, it is doubtful that any culture could gain much knowledge or understanding of another from an exhibit with so little investigation of cultural context. A comprehensive explanation must also include comparison of the reasons for the art and its universal impulse.

Historically, primitivism became a current in European art in the late nineteenth century. Goldwater found a number of reasons for the Europeans' interest in and attraction to the previously little known tribal art, especially as an art form. Formerly, because of

Darwin's theory of human evolution in which the "savage was considered its lowest form," ethnographic museums had been the only venue for viewing tribal objects. (Goldwater 25). As a result of colonization, European museums began to fill with large collections of tribal art. A scientific anthropological perspective was the primary criterion for looking at tribal sculpture. Later, artists of the Modern period began to examine these objects as art forms in terms of both style and creative impulse.

During the nineteenth century, much of the appeal of the exotic was that it represented a return to a simpler way of life. There was also a desire to return to the past, to the original. At the beginning of the century, the *Barbus* [4] saw the pre-Greek era as the most basic. They valued the primitive as representative of the original, even though their art did not reflect it.

During the Romantic period, there was an interest in the exotic as geographically distant. Delacroix and Ingres both dealt with the Islamic East and dramatic scenery. Their interest was a return to the 'Biblical past.' (Goldwater 52) The curiosity about an unfamiliar place, along with religious and historical interest, prompted their use of "Oriental" subjects.[5]

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[4] The *Barbus* were also known as *Les Primitifs, Les Meditateurs, and Les Penseurs.* They were a rebellious group of French artists who formed a colony from1800-1803. The group initially were composed of students of Jacques-Louis David at the Louvre. They broke from his atelier in favor of a purer form of art. Donning beards and cloaks and living in a deserted convent alienated them from society. The setting provided them a meditative escape from the technological reminders of the modern world. See George Levitine, *The Dawn of Bohemianism: the Barbus Rebellion and Primitivism in Neoclassical France* (University Park,1978) p.69.

[5] *Orientalism* was on a parallel with *primitivism* --it was an escape from the industrialized world. It was a romantic view of an area alien to "civilized" Europe and the United States. There was renewed interest in the nineteenth century in the Eastern cultures due to newly established trade routes. The art of the Orient provided a culture unlike that of Europe. It was about a people different from themselves.

Gauguin, however, epitomized the movement to recapture the essence of tribal cultures when in 1891 he chose to leave the industrialized world to live among the Tahitians. Gauguin had a romantic view of how and why he would assimilate his surroundings. We know that total transformation never took place for him, nor was it automatic. Direct contact could not change his psyche or his past. Instead, Gauguin borrowed tribal motifs and decorative elements, but could never totally erase his former life to become spiritually enmeshed in another culture. The simplicity of nature that Gauguin sought was less attainable than he hoped. He was unable to dismiss his dependence on Paris either financially or artistically. Gauguin identified himself as a "barbarian" both in life and art. He felt that art and life should be connected. (Goldwater 64) He rejected the Parisian art scene, as he was rejected by it. His work was viewed as being flat and distorted, his lifestyle barbaric. Even though Gauguin left Parisian society to seek happiness, frustration characterized his existence with the Tahitian people.

Ironically, Gauguin infused his work with the same religious elements that he denounced. Before he left Europe, moved by the religious devotion of the provincial Bretons, Gauguin took their lifestyle as a subject for his paintings. In *The Yellow Christ,* 1889, he exemplifies the simplicity of the peasants and comes close to the primitivism he was later seeking in other lands. Unfortunately, he did not recognize it there. All the qualities Gauguin thought he would find in a primitive culture already existed right before his eyes. While adopting the formal flatness and decorative

characteristics of the Japanese print, Gauguin's synthetic art was seeking the essential truths of the universe by combining symbols with raw emotions. The essences of human experience became the basis for his work. (Goldwater 81)

In his essay on Gauguin in *Primitivism*, Kirk Varnedoe describes him as having provided the earliest connections between primitivism and modernism. Gauguin was the first example of a modern European artist who lived primitivism, or at least attempted to. The nineteenth-century artists had a more romantic outlook, and Gauguin wished to escape to a world removed from the artificial aristocratic society he had inherited. He based his view of the South Seas on "experience, research, and speculation." (190) Gauguin rejected the nature-based, origin-oriented ideas (naturalism and Darwinism) of the nineteenth century. Instead, he tried to adopt the ethos of the Tahitians to reflect the idea of primitivism as a positive instinct inherent in all mankind. A corrupt, overdeveloped culture such as his own often lost sight of this quality. He sought to combine a variety of sources and ideas to make use of his complex intellect. He would blend body and spirit, mind and senses. Much of his thinking was contradictory and ambivalent. He admired both the simple and the complex. His work was full of both religious symbolism and sexual references. He merged the physical and the metaphysical. In his *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, Gauguin presents obvious Polynesian references and the deeper underlying symbolism, allowing a number of possible interpretations. Here, the figure of a Tahitian girl and the figure of death behind her interact in an unclear association. Each appears to

be aware of the other, but the relationship between the two is undefined. Gauguin's art connects the mind and spirit, the rational and irrational, science and aesthetics. Although his art and life were unfulfilling and frustrating to him in regard to experiencing primitivism first-hand, Gauguin did lay the groundwork for later affinities between the tribal and the modern. He caused artists to take a closer look at other cultures that had formerly been disregarded and examine what they might contribute. They recognized that the affinity to the spiritual that characterized tribal cultures was disappearing in the rational scientific world.

As exposure to African and Oceanic art increased in Europe, artists found affinities to the tribal that were more emotional and psychological. More than fifty years ago, Goldwater identified the spiritual aspect of primitivism as an instinctive affinity. Many artists of the post-Impressionist period dealt with subjects that symbolized the basic emotions of life at a gut level. Odilon Redon portrayed dream forms that had a deep psychological significance. (Goldwater 57). The feelings portrayed in German Expressionism, as represented by Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, 1893, combined symbolism and spirit with exaggeration of both. The painting captured the nature of feeling in its barest form.

The Germans came in contact with both African and Oceanic art and immediately noticed their artistic value. The high level of quality, and the immediacy and intensity present in the so-called primitive works, impressed the artists of the Brücke (Bridge)

group.[6] The artists of the Brücke dealt with raw violent emotion to express the personal social aspect of human character and conduct.

Like Gauguin, Nolde, one of the Brücke artists, sought to experience the "primitive" firsthand by traveling to New Guinea. However, Nolde did not merely copy motifs but waited until he got back to Germany to incorporate and interpret the essence of the primitive. Nolde painted a number of paintings of *Masks*, 1911-1920, that retain the general feeling of tribal art but are too far from exact representation to be classified with any particular group. His landscapes capture a tropical approach to nature with an emotional connection. Nolde said he was trying to show the inner strength of expression. (Goldwater 116) The simplistic cruder style expressed a deeper level of the personal than was possible with a refined exterior representation.

Donald Gordon's essay, "German Expressionism," in the *"Primitivism"* catalog, discusses Nolde's *Still Life with Masks I*, 1911. Nolde uses identifiable images from several tribal cultures in the same painting. Gordon concludes that Nolde combined the direct influence of specific tribal objects and their emotional impact. Because of the pronounced similarity of facial features to the tribal masks Nolde was familiar with, Gordon feels that the "emotional intensity" cannot exist without "caricature" but is directly evolved from it. Specific tribal sources are sometimes recognizable, and at other times are only feelings. The derivative expression on the masks conveys the emotional quality of the work.

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[6]The Brücke group was a German Expressionist group formed in Dresden in 1905. It stressed "immediacy and authenticity."(Gordon, D., p.371)

Therefore the affinities between the tribal and the Western are both direct and indirect. (380)

Another group in Germany, the *Blaue Reiter*, was founded in 1911 by Kandinsky. Through their wider exposure and more complex portrayal of primitive art, the *Blaue Reiter* found affinities in the spiritual and mystical part of human experience. Kandinsky felt he shared with tribal peoples his inner feelings rather than the external appearance of his art. Tribal artists related to their environment, just as contemporary artists related to their own experience. (Goldwater 129) Kandinsky's paintings were non-objective, and the intellectualizing of formal affinities continued in the abstract works of the Suprematists in 1914. This group eliminated subject matter and concentrated on pure shape and color as a universal language. Malevich was the group's primary proponent. He believed in the simplest, purest truth as expressed in a reduced geometric form.

Stylistically, another example of reduced geometric form was found in Cubism. It related to the geometric and monochromatic nature of African sculpture. In the later phase of Cubism, Picasso and Braque expressed another affinity between the tribal and modern by using collage and assemblage with found objects.

Some of Picasso's understanding of African art is evident in his 1907 *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and other works from this period. The formal affinities are revealed in his blocky bodies, concave faces, abstraction, surface pattern, reduction, simplification and frontal poses. Likewise, he felt strong emotional and conceptual affinities of "magical" power that he tried to transmit in his own

work. Picasso was conscious of a direct connection to the African spirituality, but he did not realize that the same spirituality might be basic to all mankind.

Rubin's contribution on Picasso in *Primitivism* presents him as the primary example of an artist who was influenced by tribal art. Picasso was an avid collector of African and Oceanic art and much of his work shows strong reference to it. By surrounding himself with tribal objects, he allowed them to enter his psyche and become part of his visual vocabulary. Picasso disclaimed any direct influence but did not deny the affinities present as a result of his knowledge of the principles of African art.

For example, in *Demoiselles d'Avignon* the two figures on the right closely resemble African sculpture. Picasso changed this painting from narrative to iconic (frontal, compressed, abstract) after he viewed African art for the first time at the Trocadero in 1907.[7] The painting changed from a realistic portrayal illustrating his repugnance toward the women of the bordellos to an abstraction of female figures with references to African masks. The Trocadero experience made such a positive impact on him that it is not surprising that his art changed as well, but Picasso denied that the influence ever became a conscious imitation.

There were several misconceptions about *Demoiselles* regarding it as representative of Cubism. It was actually a prelude to Cubism as it indicates the development from the visual to the conceptual portrayal of form, with the reduction and abstraction of

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[7] The Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero (now Musée de L'Homme) in Paris opened to the public in 1882. Here Picasso was overwhelmed by his first exposure to large collections of African and Oceanic art.

features into geometric shapes. (Rubin "Picasso" 253) Picasso's later three-dimensional construction *Guitar*, 1912, more closely resembles the Cubistic geometric principles related to African art.

Goldwater discusses another conceptual affinity, the subconscious as found in Surrealism. The Surrealists were concerned with human nature as revealed in psychology. The inner inspiration was a feeling experienced by all humanity. Although more scientifically based than the other groups, it dealt with dreams and intuition -- the inventive imagination. (Goldwater 222)

Evan Maurer further discusses Surrealism in his chapter in *Primitivism.* This movement was begun in the 1920's by a group of French writers and poets, whose interests included psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and politics. The artists concentrated on dreams, the unconscious, and the need for myth. In exploration of these areas, the Surrealists investigated the writings of Sir James Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Henri Bergson. Frazer theorized that all cultures experience basic common thoughts which can be found in their mythologies. (541)

Both Frazer and Levy-Bruhl wrote about animism and totemism. They believed that everything in nature is connected to a spiritual force. A particular spirit or soul guides each plant and animal. Freud carried the idea one step further into the psychoanalysis of dreams. Feelings could be revealed in dreams in a metaphoric form. Art could express these forms symbolically. (Maurer 543) As Gauguin had found allegoric similarities between the tribal and the modern at a deeper spiritual level, so did the Surrealists. The symbols transformed the intangible into the

perceptual. Along with these conceptual connections, the Surrealists used polychromatic color schemes and curvilinear forms that showed stylistic affinities primarily with Oceanic art.

The Surrealist Max Ernst's extensive use of totems in his paintings and sculpture caused some people, including himself, to think of him as a shaman. Even though Ernst's work was produced in the mid-twentieth century, scholars had written much on the topic of shamans since the 1880s. (Maurer 566) Shamans were said to embody supernatural powers that allowed them to act as healers and interpreters. Spirits revealed to them in a dream assisted them in communicating their message to others.

In "Abstract Expressionism," Varnedoe's chapter in *Primitivism*, he writes about the continued use of totems and shamans in American art. By 1940 American artists were pulling away from the formal trends of Europe and moving toward the spiritual universal ideas of the Modern. They wanted something unlike the Surrealists' use of Freud's view of the unconscious, which they found too elaborate and synthetic. They preferred the collective approach of the tribal, which incorporated innate tendencies involved with emotions. (619)

In the American artists' continuing quest to obtain a distinctiveness from Europe and to develop a national identity, they began to examine Native American objects. The Native American pictographs and symbols, along with myth and ritual, supplied artists with new imagery. Adolph Gottlieb's use of signs that referred to man's association with the earliest forms of writing exemplified human evolution (the interpretation of modernists that

erroneously associated primitive with an earlier stage of evolution and man's beginnings, especially regarding the origins of creativity). Mark Rothko's interest in the spiritual unconscious incorporated ritual and inner expression, as his visually reductive imagery reflected the less identifiable sensory experiences of human beings.

The art of the forties continued to include ties to primitivism. The painters of this period involved the distant past and its origins. Their theories were not unlike those of more recent artists, as Varnedoe discussed in the last chapter of the *Primitivism* catalog, "Contemporary Explorations." The American artist who most exemplified Abstract Expressionism was Jackson Pollock, who became so involved with the spiritual and ritualistic that he assumed the role of shaman.[8] Pollock's study of psychology combined an inner personal expression with the magic of tribal signs. As he moved from the symbolic sexual and fertility imagery of the Northwest Indians to non-objective representation, Pollock developed a more personal style directed entirely by his inner soul and subconscious mind. He threw and poured paint onto large canvases as he dealt with energy, freedom and scale. These "action paintings" were generated by his inner soul and the instinctive, universal aspects of human nature.

Since the late 1960's, the affinity of modern Western art and tribal art has been mostly conceptual. Western art today deals with ideas rather than objects and allows numerous interpretations. The artists of this period have rejected Abstract Expressionism and the

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[8] Pollock's art explored the unconscious and the primitive, especially Native American myth and iconography. He was considered a spiritual leader or shaman of the American artists of the forties.(Varnedoe, p. 640)

technical age, and embraced an aesthetic that depicts nature and the universe. Earthworks of the 1970's were a blend of science and senses, and time and space. Artists active in this group were concerned with decay, tactile surfaces, survival, prehistory, and the monumental. There was a sense of relating the earth and the heavens by giving them a sense of order. (Varnedoe "Contemporary" 666) Michelle Stuart's fascination with materials took the form of using natural objects to connect her art to the past. Non-Earthwork artists of the period such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor treated materials in a repetitive ritualistic manner. Nancy Graves' *Totem*, 1970, combined fabrics and animal skins in a shamanistic way.[9]

Another shaman-artist[10] of this time was Joseph Beuys, who worked with metaphoric myth and ritual to create art as performance. He acted as the vehicle for transforming ancient historical practices into contemporary drama. Beuys' art, like much other art since the 1960's, was highly political. The world was in a state of upheaval and dissatisfaction. Beuys and others reacted to the immorality of war and oppression. Tribal art received more attention because of a belief in the greater "purity" of the primitive.

The work of Janice Gordon also draws on the various traditions. Her work involves the psychology of human nature. She displays her knowledge of Jung with topics of human relationships and their solutions. Gordon's art combines the psychology and

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[9] Graves sought to link man's sense of order of prehistoric times with contemporary exploration of science. She felt the more that is investigated and discovered, the more man's relationship with nature is intensified. (Varnedoe, 679)

[10] Much has been written lately on shamanistic practice in art, see Thomas McEvilley, "Art in the Dark," *Artforum*, Summer 1983. See also "Stones, Bones, and Skin Ritual and Shamanistic Art," a special issue of *Artscanada*, December 1973/January 1974.

allegory of the Surrealists with the universal emotion of the Abstract Expressionists. Her use of metaphoric myth, symbols, ritual and tactile natural materials tie her work to that of contemporary Western artists.

Now revered and valued as an art form by Western artists, tribal art should not overshadow Western art. Varnedoe makes a point of asserting that the tribal and the Western are equally viable, and notes that some followings of the primitive are merely trendy and cultish. Instead, the exposure to other cultures should have as its end a broadening and acceptance of a worldwide understanding and an opportunity for a new language of expression. (Varnedoe "Contemporary" 682)

As a beginning to this process, Goldwater's and Rubin's books have both opened our eyes to viewing other cultures by generating much praise and criticism. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the reactions to the 1984 MOMA exhibit and catalog *Primitivism.* If the exhibition and catalog had been less ambitious and had not involved such an impressive array of scholars, they might not have caused such a stir. Now, almost a decade later, art historians continue to debate issues raised by the exhibition and its catalog.

Chapter 2. The Great Debate: The Criticism Continues.

Since the celebrated 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, numerous articles have debated a variety of issues raised by the show.[11] These issues deal with several aspects of how Western and non-Western (tribal) art might be compared or exhibited. Is it possible to discuss both types of art on the same plane? If so, did this exhibit and catalog succeed in effectively making connections between the two? Most critics feel that the affinities brought out in the exhibit were unfounded or improperly focused. In this chapter I will discuss the faults a few representative critics perceived in the show. Many found the exhibition offensive to tribal cultures and deficient in documentation. They feared that it misrepresented tribal art and was detrimental to its perception.

Just what was the motivation behind the exhibit? James Clifford wrote a lengthy article at the outset of the show and later a book that further argued the same topics.[12] In the article, Clifford points out that Western hegemony heavily affects the manner of acquisition and presentation of tribal objects. Formerly, these objects had received little attention as art because of the ways they had been procured during colonization and their ethnographic

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[11] Some reviews of the exhibition and its catalog praised its depth and scope as intellectual and thought provoking, but most did so with some reservations. The reference to "blockbuster" show refers primarily to its impressive size. See Barbara Rose's interview with Rubin, "The Man From MOMA," *Vogue* August, 1984. See also Kay Larson's review of the *Primitivism* exhibition " 'Primitivism' at MOMA," *New York* September 17, 1984.

[12] Clifford's article is later included as a chapter in his book, see "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America* April 1985 and see also *Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, 1988).

reclassification. The tribal objects had not been purchased as art, but rather as booty and trophies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Europeans began to gain world power, they unethically conquered many tribal nations for territorial dominion. Why suddenly reconsider these objects? For whose benefit? Using what criteria?

Clifford points out that the affinities were not discussed for ethnographic or even historical reasons. Rather, he suggests that the motives were more "celebration" than "critical examination." (Clifford "Histories" 169) Clifford further takes exception to Rubin's statement that he was not knowledgeable about these peoples nor was that the intent of the exhibit. This should not excuse the show's lack of cultural context. Clifford, along with many other scholars, feels that ignorance is no defense and that Rubin was not willing to consider anything beyond his own interests. (Clifford "Histories" 171)

If Rubin wished to present examples from the viewpoint of his own aesthetics, then why was he not willing to consult with artists from the tribal cultures? Rubin claims an interest in other cultures but still insists on evaluating them from his own perspective. There is no attempt to capture the criteria of the people who created the art; as Clifford sees it, Rubin represents a biased point of view. Although the tribal art was presented in an art setting rather than an ethnographic museum, no specifics, such as artist, date, place of origin, or purpose were mentioned on the tribal examples. What purported to be an elevation of the tribal art and cultures was really a total disregard for the people who produced the objects. MOMA did

not consider any African criteria for producing art, but instead imposed their own standards and associations related to Western Modern art and not necessarily applicable to this exhibit.

With respect to collecting the objects, Clifford questions what criterion MOMA or the collectors used? How did they determine the value of the art? A piece of art once valued for its religious power loses that meaning in the museum setting. Collectors may search to recapture the same inner experience that the object originally conveyed, but are of course unable to when its original context is absent. So, museums then set their own criteria and reclassify according to their own systems. (Clifford Predicament 220) Janice Gordon finds the museum setting an inadequate venue for her art because of the viewer's inability to interact with the object.

In the "Contemporary Explorations" section of the exhibition, Varnedoe refers to conceptual affinities, but to Clifford the references only create chaos and confusion. He feels that Varnedoe cites these qualities only to promote Western ego and that they obscure historical continuity and overload the viewer with ideas that are not specific to any related culture. (Clifford "Histories" 176) Clifford writes that it would have been more appropriate to show how the modern tribal cultures are ingesting and syncretizing Western culture into their current art. Varnedoe gives few examples of either tribal or Western art of the 1980's.

From the early twentieth century, European artists proceeded carefully in absorbing the tribal. Rubin believes that "elective affinities" occurred at a time when society was ready to accept them. There had been a gradual infiltration of non-Western art into

Europe during the nineteenth century, which better prepared it to receive the tribal. McEvilley asserts that MOMA mindfully selected both terminology and the timing of the exhibit to promote the "Modernist esthetic."[13] ("Doctor" 57) He also finds the term "affinity" presumptuous, having little legitimacy other than having been formerly used by Goldwater. When Rubin juxtaposes a modern object with a tribal one to which it has formerly had no relationship, it is only his desire that puts it in the affinity category. McEvilley points out that the popularity and appeal of primitivism had very little connection to the actual affinities between the tribal and the modern. Most of the similarities were purely coincidental and unplanned. However, because the tie-in would create a receptive audience, MOMA suggested affinities between the two. Self-promotion was the primary reason for the comparisons. Certainly, there was little research to advance the cause of tribal art. (McEvilley "Doctor" 60)

Hilton Kramer, an advocate of conservative Modernism, felt more attention should have be placed on the bourgeois and how it related to the idea of primitivism. Why did technologically advanced cultures always revolt and seek to return to the ways of the primitive? Kramer asserts that they were enraptured by the idea of a simpler, more basic type of life. He is offended by Rubin's always punctuating the term "primitivism" with quotation marks, as he does in the title, to indicate that it belongs to someone else. Kramer sees Rubin's distinction of the term as pejorative, since he uses the

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[13]McEvilley feels that the Modern esthetics of "freedom, innocence, universality, and objective value" are criteria for promoting the connection between primitive and modern.

term only for comparison and never identifies with it. Rubin places himself above and disassociates himself (the museum) from primitivism and the art of tribal cultures. (Kramer "Conundrum" 7)

In his earlier critique of the 1982 opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kramer notes that Westerners have elevated tribal art by rescuing[14] it and promoting it aesthetically. (Kramer "High Art" 61) But, he then adds, that is the only way one culture can evaluate another. How can one culture truly know the other or the impetus behind it without living it? (62) While Kramer felt MOMA choreographed the *Primitivism* exhibit to put Modernism in a superior light, others felt that the objects chosen for the exhibit favored the tribal.

Primitivism is difficult to define and interpret. Why was the MOMA exhibit in 1984 only able to reflect its own Western viewpoint? An article by Rasheed Araeen in Hiller's *Myth of Primitivism* discusses the imperialistic and racist aspect of the show. The exhibit and catalog showed no interest in promoting any culture other than that which reflected Western Modernism. (164) The selectors of the objects from other cultures did not consult the people who created them or investigate their ability or knowledge. Instead the tribal objects coalesce into all-encompassing categories designated by the directors of the exhibit. The museum designed these categories to defend its own agenda. (165)

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[14] I do not agree that we have necessarily "rescued" these objects, because we often acquired them by immoral methods. I do agree that it is difficult to understand fully another culture's motivation or creative impulses. This should not prevent us from respecting another culture and trying to get the information that would enable us to understand it.

Another issue raised by the MOMA exhibit was the emic/etic question of whether or not the museum presented itself as an outsider or as knowledgeable about other cultures. The emic (inside) view of tribal art would present positions that were based on ethnographic research. Thomas McEvilley objected to Rubin's insistence that MOMA would not take the role of emic observer, but then proceeded to speculate on tribal intent. ("Doctor" 58) How can anyone presume to understand a culture so different from their own without first doing extensive research? McEvilley thinks art historians should stay in their own territory with their own particular methods of analysis, if they repeatedly announce that is their purpose. Instead, along with a Western etic analysis of formal similarities, Rubin hypothesizes affinities of spirit when he has no knowledge about what the tribal consciousness might be. As I have stated in my thesis, the spiritual affinities may be universally present, in which case tribal intent is irrelevant.

Another offshoot of the emic/etic question is the idea of multiculturalism. Under the guise of promoting multiculturalism is often hidden a racist outlook, a more separatist attitude, especially when it comes from the authority of the institution. (Araeen 172) It includes the "different," but not always with equal status. It is often a patronizing attitude that creates a divisive rather than a global outlook. The token inclusion of the tribal precludes its full participation or status. Art history remains without full representation of the "other." (Araeen 181)

Arthur Danto finds the affinities in the MOMA show not only exaggerated, but detrimental. In his scathing article "Defective

Affinities," Danto finds little basis for the exhaustive exhibit at the MOMA. Although MOMA admitted in the brochure accompanying the exhibition that the affinities were mostly stylistic and were not based on any former relationship, the show seemed based on the premise of affinities. Danto takes issue with the placing of tribal art in an art museum setting. He argues that any comparison or explanation of these objects should only be in terms of their magical power or significance. Tribal objects out of context, as aesthetic as they might be, are far removed from their real function. Tribal objects need to be a vehicle with which others interact. The observer has no exchange with the parties involved in their making. The objects are not "art" in the Western sense of the word.

While the exhibition claimed to be concerned with more than pure aesthetics, its curators had a hard time defining and backing its ideas. Hilton Kramer found the exhibit unable to fulfill its intention of dealing with affinities of ideas. He admits that the catalog is scholarly, but finds the exhibition to give little more than lip service to any ideas it might bring up, because of the museum setting format. Not only is the time too brief for the viewer to conceive any opinions, but the meanings are predefined and stated on the labels, leaving no room for speculation. Kramer feels that the MOMA show was a poor representation of what the catalog set out to do. (Kramer "Conundrum" 2) Janice Gordon, on the other hand, prepared a video to accompany her exhibition *Recent Constructions* in order to compensate for the lack of interaction in a museum setting and to allow the viewer more opportunity to experience her work on another level.

Danto suggests that MOMA might have succeeded in explaining the affinities between tribal and modern objects by digging deeper into why modern artists who were collectors found reasons to react to and reinterpret tribal art. What exactly was the real reason for incorporating tribal art into their work? (Danto "Defective" 591)

The comparisons portrayed in the MOMA exhibit, James Clifford feels, were weak and created a cloud of confusion rather than any real understanding. He is disturbed by the lack of interest in any documentation, as if the tribal art were not worthy of it. This causes it not to fit into any time or location and leads to generalities. Clifford is uncomfortable with the supposed "affinities" in the exhibition and catalog. He states that "affinity" is a word "suggesting a deeper or more natural relationship than mere resemblance or juxtaposition. It connotes a common quality or essence." (Clifford "Histories" 165) There is little investigation into the spirit or nature of tribal art. Most of the comparisons were either aesthetic or strictly from the vantage point of the Westerner. The comparisons were little more than fortuitous resemblances. The only affinity Clifford sees between the tribal and the modern is their common lack of naturalism and illusionism. He also rejects the catchall categories of conceptual similarities that include "magic," "ritualism," and use of "natural materials." (Predicament 192) I think Clifford should not discount the conceptual affinities, however vague. The impetus is more universal, an idea which Clifford also finds unsettling. When Rubin describes Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932, he compares it to the "mythic universals" of a Northwest Coast Eskimo mask. Picasso's reference to the sun and

moon may have little to do with the reasons for the iconography present in the mask. It disturbed Clifford that the affinities were so specific, rather than the impulses common to inner gut-level reactions. (Rubin "Picasso" 330)

There are only so many ideas available for the creative mind, no matter where or when they take place. Is there anything that is original in art? Clifford states there is a "limitation of possibilities" in art, both aesthetically and conceptually, that are nonconducive to establishing affinities that are meaningful. (Predicament 191) A work may look identical to another but be unrelated in every other way.

Kramer feels that the "German Expressionism" chapter in the *Primitivism* catalog is the one well-written section that unites the Expressionists' "life and art ideas." He objects to the lack of emphasis placed on German Expressionism in both the exhibit and the catalog. Kramer feels that life and ideas best define primitivism as the greatest affinity between the tribal and the modern. The instinctive presence found in both groups creates an affinity that, in Kramer's view, should be the basis of the exhibit, showing the historical progression of primitivism in modern art. This concept more closely relates to the idea of a universal commonality. Instead, Rubin's famous friend, Picasso, occupies most of Rubin's attention. Picasso's stylistic affinity and his enlightening Trocadero experience with the "magic" of tribal objects are Rubin's primary focus. (Kramer "Conundrum" 4)

Although Yve-Alain Bois thought the tribal works aesthetically overpowered the modern, he did agree that the show was sorely

lacking from the conceptual point of view. Because the objects were displayed without contextual information, they were missing their only true affinity. It is accurate or fair to postulate an affinity only when both formal and conceptual similarities are evident. To present affinities only from a formal bias causes confusion. Objects in the exhibit placed together for conceptual comparison were also similar in appearance. A stronger argument for the conceptual affinity would have been examples that were formally dissimilar. Janice Gordon's art rarely relates to the formal qualities of the tribal traditions. The affinities are elsewhere, on a spiritual plane.

Bois thought that the one section of the exhibition that might have succeeded in discussing the conceptual was "Contemporary Explorations." Unfortunately, examples here again portray superficial comparisons rather than meaningful affinities. Even when the subject matter was similar, the reasoning process behind the works is conspicuously absent. Whether one is comparing the order of the universe or the spirit of aggression, the conceptual is always harder to define and describe. Attempts to align nature and culture left out examples from the most recent neoprimitivists that could have established these affinities. To complete the historical trend the exhibit should have included these modernists. (Bois "Pensée" 187) Even if the directors of the exhibit had a negative opinion of the current art scene, they should have included the work if the affinities were present.

A writer who recently tried to make these comparisons and clarify the misconceptions about primitivism is Lynne Cooke. In Susan Hiller's recent anthology of essays on the topic, *The Myth of*

Primitivism, Cooke may be trying to bring closure to the debate. Cooke updates the issue of "hard" or conceptual primitivism versus "soft" or formal. "Hard" primitivism includes the attraction to the collective societies who communed with nature, often as a longing for the past and a simpler, more meaningful life. The art of these artists frequently contains signs that are symbolic but whose meaning is lost or secret. (Cooke 140) Can we recapture what we assume is a better life without ever being a part of it? Does the mystery create part of the intrigue? The remoteness and inaccessibility of these societies, both present and past, may be the basis of their appeal. There is a desire to merge science and nature, past and future. In the 1960's and 1970's, Earth art tried to bring technology and nature together, and Performance art used ritual and ceremony. (Cooke 141) The art of the 1980's found primitivism in painting that looked like expressionism but in which the borrowed motifs contained none of their former meanings. Artists exploited and overused the signs to the point that they became commonplace. Baselitz, for instance, painted with the same popular imagery but disguised it with his upside-down format. He wished to make the meaning irrelevant. (Cooke 145)

The "soft" primitivist artists reflected the materials of primitivism by responding to the formal aspects of the tribal. Lucas Samaras took a psychological approach to icons and fetish objects by having them exist in a fictional rather than mythic state. His objects reflect the ever-changing contemporary period, not a ritualistic stable environment. (Cooke 149) His sculptured boxes are kitsch examples ridiculing the truth. He, like other "soft"

primitivist artists of the 1980's, deals with positive and negative associations and dichotomies. The editor, Hiller, an artist herself, also explores the avenues of contemporary primitivism in terms of how she can express the true female self. (Cooke 150)

Much controversy remains as to which realm tribal objects belong to, aesthetic or conceptual. Can art be purely aesthetic? Cultures different from one's own produce art within their own context. We, in turn, remove it from its original context and reinterpret it from our own vantage point. Particularly in the absence of research and further study, there exist huge gaps in information and understanding of art from other cultures. Each culture views art from its own understanding, which must be increased by providing ethnographic information about the unknown tradition. Without supporting data, these gaps lead to assumptions and stereotypes that are inaccurate and often detrimental. (Hiller 187)

Can these separate cultures coexist and ever understand each other? Is there anything universal about their art? A Western view of history is a linear progression with an emphasis on innovation. All cultures produce art that reflects their values and their need to survive and improve. There can never be a universal art as long as one culture desires to overpower and dominate the other. (Araeen 168) There must be mutual respect and the will to understand and learn from each other. Even with a willingness to accept another culture, is it possible to relate on the same level? Are there tendencies that are truly universal and basic to all mankind? Although some human experiences and emotions are constant, i.e.,

birth, death, love, anger, fear, the way we interpret these varies within their context. The meanings are not universal. The physiognomic expressions of a smile, a frown, may have a limited range, but their meanings vary from culture to culture. (Howell 224) Art must reflect the experience of its creator who is a product of her/his society. Along with the personalization of art experience comes something that is universal and basic to all mankind. This is the spirituality of primitivism that transcends time and space. There are too many affinities that coexist without any former contact to allow this concept to be anything but intrinsic to humanity.

The debate continues on the topic of primitivism and modern art. Western society continues to raise issues. Critics ask questions. Art historians draw conclusions. As the next millennium approaches, mainstream art still frustrates avant garde artists. Artists look for ways to reflect their inner selves and something deeper than the superficial representations of society.

Janice Gordon is a contemporary New York artist who perhaps displays one manifestation of primitivism in today's art world. Her art contains resemblances that are spiritual rather than aesthetic. The following chapters will attempt to see if and how Gordon fits the label of primitivism. I will compare her art to African art to see where similarities exist beyond the formal. Does Janice Gordon's work have affinities to tribal art? Are the hard and soft primitivism similarities superficial or intentional? Where do they come from? Is it all a composite experience that does not warrant a label at all?

In the next chapter I will introduce Janice Gordon by giving a biographical background. This will allow the reader to become acquainted with the person and to better understand how she and her art have evolved.

Chapter 3. Janice Gordon: How an artist evolves.

In this chapter I will discuss Janice Gordon, what she is about, where she has been, and how and when she became an artist. I will give background that will later serve to explain her art and how it relates to the art of other cultures.

Janice Gordon grew up in the 1950's in the small provincial mining town of Kellogg, Idaho. Gordon remembers the town as:

> always having had a weather and time worn quality, with deep colors of the rest of the valley being subdued by the effluents and emissions from the mine's processing plants. The tunnels of the mine went deep into the surrounding mountains, so when I was growing up, I never actually saw the major activity which supported my family and the town. This may contribute to my interest in having hidden chambers and secret compartments or passageways in my work. (Letter 15 Jun 93)

Gordon's father managed the town's mine. He was an achievement-oriented mining engineer with a hard-driving work ethic. He is now retired. Janice thinks:

> his natural bent toward a scientific rational view of the world doesn't allow him to understand the significance of my art, but he does recognize the importance of my doing what I need to do according to my own standards and he acknowledges that I have "always marched to a different drummer." (Letter 15 Jun 93)

Gordon's mother always loved art but was not able to pursue it as more than an avocation. She was artistic, intuitive, and aesthetically oriented. Gordon felt her mother, who died young, was never able to realize her own artistic potential.

Gordon's mother had a B.A. degree in Home Economics and an M.A. in Child Development. She stayed home while Gordon was young, encouraging Gordon and her friends to make art. From the time Gordon was six years old, her mother would set up areas in the neighborhood where the children could draw and paint. Gordon also began to realize her artistic potential by winning art competitions in town and at her elementary school. When Gordon went to Coeur d' Alene high school, her mother became a professor of early childhood development at North Idaho Community College.

Gordon's mother mainly pursued her art in the summer. The family had a summer house on Rose Lake, a small lake outside town. There her mother did paintings of the lake and its surroundings. Her mother loved landscapes, whereas Gordon always preferred drawing people. (Letter 30 Apr 93)

Gordon's mother was responsive to nature's beauty, as well as to refined interior space. She gave Gordon an "appreciation of visual harmony, balance, color, and beauty, along with the realization that art and life are not separate. My mother was also sensitive to the emotional and spiritual nuances of life."

This upper middle-class upbringing also incorporated a religious lifestyle. Although Gordon's father was Catholic, he was non-practicing; so her mother decided to raise Janice and her older brother as Methodists. They were often involved in church activities, participating in Sunday School and choir. Gordon says, "In high school I strived to be a devoted Christian, while I chafed against its strictures and was disturbed by Christianity's exclusivity (how could a loving God send non-Christians to Hell?)."

As a child, Janice always enjoyed art. When she reached junior high school and high school, however, she became extremely academic. She shifted away from the creative emotional side of herself and moved toward the intellectual world. She drove herself to achieve. Gordon became valedictorian of her high school class with a 3.94 GPA. She started developing character traits that would follow her throughout her life. Organization and persistence were and are two of her predominant traits. She muses, "Achievement across the board only happens when you do a lot of what you don't want to do. With a goal toward achievement, I had to give up a lot, because I couldn't listen to my own deeper rhythms." (Letter 15 Jun 93)

Gordon attended Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. There she decided to pursue literature and forego any visual art interests, but her fascination with the arts never waned. As a literature major, she developed a love of reading. She states, "Words are important to me. I have always responded to literature and in fact, many of the ideas regarding my art are inspired by the things that I've read." The books she selects and enjoys reflect and influence both her life and work. A few of her favorite books include: *Cry the Beloved Country* and *Too Late the Phalarope,* by Alan Paton, a South African writer; *The Bone People*, by Keri Hulme, a New Zealand writer; *An Imaginary Life*, by David Malouf, an Australian author; *The Remnants of the Day*, by Ishiguro, a Japanese writer; *Crossing to Safety*, by Wallace Stegner; and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, by J.M.Coetze, a South African writer. Obviously, Gordon's interests include many cultures.

Gordon's first exposure to people of other cultures was at Whitman College. She still corresponds with one of her good friends from Saudi Arabia whom she met there. Gordon feels that, "since that time, I have been fascinated with other cultures. I love different languages, foods, customs, ways of thinking. I have never felt separate from other cultures, or that people from any other culture are fundamentally different than I."

Along with *Animal Dreams*, by Beverly Kingsolver, and *Louise Nevelson*, by Laurie Lisle, Gordon recently read the best seller, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, by Clarissa Estés, a Jungian scholar. *Wolves* is about the archetypal woman's return to basic instincts. Gordon strongly identifies with this book, as it appears to closely describe her philosophy of life. The stories in this book deal with issues of the soul. The book recounts folktales that reveal patterns in life with psychological associations. Estés empowers her readers and clients to reach their souls through stories and art. She discusses the "craft of making" as in "fetish and talisman making." Estés says, "Art is not just for oneself ... [it is] also ... for those who follow." (15) She believes that stories are powerful forces that "guide us about the complexities of life." (16) The stories aid in the search to find one's inner self and instruct one in life's daily functions. Gordon's art also tells stories for both herself and her viewers. These stories help her work through her own problems and act as a vehicle for others to do the same.

Gordon believes that art functions in the same way as stories: "It is a way to get to soul issues that you can't get to in a rational, linear fashion ... art provides a way to capture and touch the

fundamentals and unexplainable." (Interview 12 Feb 93) This belief is consistent with Jung's idea that the visual arts, like religion, involve the transformation of objects into symbols. (Jung Man 96)

After two years of college, Gordon studied Italian in summer school at the University of Washington. The following fall, she spent her junior year abroad at Chicago's Loyola University's Rome center. Then, after college in 1969, she married Richard Sottilaro and spent the first few years of a fourteen-year marriage returning to Rome with her husband. Since it was difficult to obtain a work permit in a foreign country, Gordon did a variety of things. Having studied Italian in college, she was able to get a job doing translations for a Jungian psychiatrist. Rome left Gordon with many lasting impressions. She felt connected to the sensual nature of Italy and its ancient past. Later in her art, she would experience a love of layering and old materials reminiscent of the weathered buildings, flaking frescoes, and muted rich colors of Tuscany, to which she had responded so fervently as a young woman.

After Rome, Gordon and her husband returned to the United States. They moved to New York, where her husband did a residency in ophthalmology at Brooklyn Eye and Ear Hospital.

The 1970's became a time of searching for Gordon. She obtained a Masters degree in psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York City, but the "lack of soul" in psychological research and theory left Gordon unsatisfied, so she decided not to go on for a doctorate. Instead, Gordon chose to do her own exploration in the field and preferred the theories of Carl Jung to Freud. She began to read some esoteric and Eastern philosophies, which

suggested viewing the world from more complex perspectives than she had previously considered.

Gordon began her own "therapeutic journey" under the guidance of a psychiatrist who combined the spiritual with the psychological. She also joined a group that discussed spiritually oriented writings centered on the divine nature of life. Gordon said, "the group stressed the individual's responsibility to work through one's own difficulties in order to manifest the divine nature within oneself."

Throughout this period Gordon mainly worked doing counseling in non-profit settings and creating job re-training programs for low-income people. She also renovated a one-hundred-fifty-year-old brownstone that she and her husband bought. About this experience Gordon said, "I acquired skills and developed a fondness for working with old materials." During this time Gordon was "working hard and learning a great deal." She reflects, "I was striving to transform my life in both physical and spiritual/psychic realms. I basically felt a sense of frustration with my life. I felt I must have a calling, but I did not know what it was." (Letter 15 Jun 93)

In 1980 her mother died. At that point, Gordon got in touch with her own mortality. To her, her mother had never seemed fulfilled. Gordon decided she could not wait for things to happen and must start making some decisions. Gordon began to take care of her physical self. Within a year she quit smoking ("a destructive act"), started cooking more interesting and healthy foods, and began exercising.

By 1983 Gordon decided to completely abandon her previous lifestyle. She left everything of value that she loved -- including her husband, her newly renovated house and affluent lifestyle. She left with few of her family possessions and sublet an apartment in Manhattan. Soon the sublet was up. She could not find anything to rent, and was confused about what to do next in her life. Gordon had reached the bottom. She remembers 1984/1985 as "the most difficult period of my life." She enlisted the help of therapists, but that also proved unsuccessful. She was not getting any solutions. Someone suggested that she go to see Grace Meyerjack, a cloistered sister at Maryknoll Convent[15] and a spiritual advisor. Even though Gordon was not Catholic, she decided to seek her counsel. Sister Grace told her:

> Janice, I have rarely met anyone as strong and as clear as you are. The only problem is that you don't, at the moment, know it. You are listening too much to your mind. You are not listening to your inner voice. Normally, I would consider counseling you, but I don't want to do that, because you have to find this out on your own. What you need to do is to listen to that still, small voice. Anything that voice says to do, you do. If you need to sleep, you sleep. If you need to eat, you eat. If you need to call someone, you call someone. But don't listen to your mind at all, because your mind isn't going to give you any solutions. If you do that, your path will literally open up. Things will happen for you -- you just won't believe. It will become very clear. (Interview 22 Nov 92)

That night Gordon got a telephone call from Kathi Coyle DeAngelis, an old friend who was a painter. She said, "You know,

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[15]The Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic from New York State were the missionaries who were kidnapped and murdered in El Salvador on December 3, 1980.

Figure 1. Janice Gordon. 1984. *Self Portrait.* o/c.

Janice, I always felt like you wanted to be an artist. Why don't you let me give you some lessons?" Gordon started painting with her friend's guidance, and soon did a self portrait. (Figure 1) Painting was so easy that it totally amazed her. She had very little previous formal training in art (lessons in college and some drawing). When

Gordon showed me the portrait on a visit to New York, it seemed quite accomplished. The hands particularly looked as if an advanced painter had painted them. They were extremely expressive and accurate.

The same week Gordon found an apartment with everything she wanted -- a wonderful space with an overhead skylight and windows that filled the room with Northern light. It was on the fifth floor of a brownstone in Greenwich Village, on the block where she had been subletting. Gordon had spent weeks looking, but everything previously had been too expensive or undesirable. Now, she had found the perfect space. A few years later, she was able to rent the whole floor and have her studio in the adjoining space. It seemed to her like a miracle, as if it were destiny.

It was now 1985 and Gordon spent the next four years studying at the Art Students League in New York City. The first two years she studied formal figure painting and then began to study abstract painting and collage with the master collage artist, Leo Manso. She committed herself full time to her art, but had to support herself by other means. She wanted her art to be uninfluenced by any financial need, so she took on various freelance jobs unrelated to her work, including bookkeeping, interior design, and financial planning.

By the summer of 1988, Gordon received an internship at Provincetown Art Museum School in Massachusetts. That summer she experimented in monoprints, figure painting and abstract painting. She studied under Tony Vevers, continuing her artistic search.

Finally, Gordon began to feel at peace. She attributes her contentment directly to her art. She recalls, "Painting began to sustain me emotionally, spiritually -- I felt as if it were the first meaningful activity I had ever made a full commitment to. I felt I was coming home to myself. I began to feel happy for the first time in my life." Until this time everything in her life had been a struggle. Her efforts to overcome difficulties and strive toward goals had been hard, ungratifying work. Since Gordon discovered art and gave herself to it, her life and work have been enjoyable and fulfilling. Her earlier conflicts were worth her finally coming in touch with her inner self.

As Gordon's art career unfolded, she came in contact with a number of people who influenced her art. Leo Manso at the Art Students League became her first mentor. Gordon respected him as an artist and found his work had a rich, beautiful elegance. In the summer of 1989, Gordon rented Manso's space in Greenwich Village. The studio was barren except for a number of his collages on the walls. Gordon spent most of the summer experimenting with figurative and abstract painting and collage. Her work was unsatisfying to her, until she tried her first constructions, *Amylum* (Figure 2) and *Beyond the Himalayas*. Gordon reminisces:

> Being in Manso's studio, I felt both inspired by his spirit and limited by what I thought might be his judgment. I needed to leave Manso's studio class at the Art Students League, because I couldn't hear my own voice above those of others working nearby, and especially, above the appearance and the opinion of Manso twice a week. Even when I was in his studio, although I was inspired by his spirit, I felt limited by my own fear of his judgment. It wasn't until I set up my own studio ... and removed

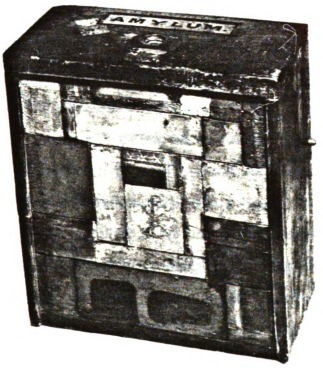

Figure 2. Janice Gordon. 1989. *Amylum.* 10 1/2x9 1/4x4 3/4".

> myself from anyone else's point of view that I began to feel comfortable and even joyous in making my own decisions. (Letter 20 Feb 93)

Gordon continued working on her constructions in her own studio and seemed finally to have found a medium that pulled all her interests together. Her three dimensional works combined her

attraction to old, natural materials with "certain psychological and spiritual concerns which could express narrative and symbolic elements." (Letter 30 Apr 93)

In 1990 a distinquished Michigan art collector discovered Gordon's work and bought three pieces, including one of her first constructions, *Amylum*. While visiting the collector's house, the director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art saw Gordon's work. He eventually visited her studio in New York and offered her an exhibit, which occurred in the fall of 1992. Gordon recollects, "The reponse to the exhibit was heartening -- the art seemed to touch both knowledgeable art critics and lay people who were not necessarily familiar with constructions or abstract art."

Along with psychology and literature, religion also plays a significant role in influencing the life of Janice Gordon. As an adult Gordon has not dismissed her Protestant upbringing, but has researched and studied a number of religions, remaining for the most part an objective observer.

Sometimes she incorporates Chinese philosophies and religions into her art. Because they did not develop from her culture, Gordon feels she can listen more closely to their teachings. She can detach herself more objectively than with Christianity, with which she has an emotional history. She reads the *I Ching*, because she is drawn to the universal spirit of its parables. She finds it a source of wisdom through the use of metaphor and allegory, upon which she bases much of her art. Much like the Surrealists, Gordon incorporates allegory and symbols by relating nature to the spiritual.

Gordon investigated a variety of approaches to religion: the Unitarian Church, which she found too ethically oriented and the Marble Collegiate Church.[16] Of the psychologically oriented Marble Collegiate church, Gordon remembers, "It was sort of like pep talks. If you do this and that, you can change your life. I believe all that, but I don't want to go to church to learn psychological principles. If I'm going to go to a religious center, I am more interested in mysticism." (Interview 22 Nov 92) Gordon is very attracted, for instance, to the writings of the Catholic mystic and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Gordon tries to find answers through her art, but the mystery remains elusive.

Gordon recalls that Joseph Campbell at one time believed that religion bridged the gap between mystery and the known. He expressed the view that modern day religions have a difficult time doing that, but art is still capable of leading us to the mystery. Gordon reflects, "An impetus for doing my art is a longing to touch the part of life residing beyond our reach." It is a way for her to have ritual without dogma. Gordon is not interested in following a formal religion. She does not wish to be part of a group that codifies and dictates. She gets in touch with her spiritual side and the divine primarily through her art. Art becomes her way of reaching beyond the mind to the unknown.

Gordon still drives herself, but now she also listens. When asked how her personality has evolved over the years, she answers:

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[16]The church of Norman Vincent Peale, who was known for his power of positive thinking.

> "I'm still a 'striver', but now I know that it is enjoying the process in life that is important, and that the goal is secondary ... a naturally flowing consequence to attending the process. ... I have a meditative approach toward my work ... I am able to feel my own rhythms, listen for my own voice (the still small voice within). It is the difference between being reactive and other-directed, and trusting my own needs and instincts." (Letter 15 Jun 93)

Gordon is a spiritually directed person who believes that a higher source produces great power. She listens to and receives direction from this higher part of her soul. Her work is the vehicle that translates the physical real world into the spiritual unexplainable universe. Gordon uses art to heal both herself and others. It creates a deeper understanding of one's life and acts as catharsis. Although her works are aesthetic, they also function on many other levels. The metaphorical and narrative aspects of her sculpture transport the viewer into another dimension - one s/he could not reach by her/himself.

The next chapter discusses the present setting for Gordon's creations and the specific outcome of this environment. A visit to Gordon's New York studio gave me a closer look into the life, surroundings, and work of Janice Gordon.

Chapter 4. Interpreting Janice Gordon's Work.

To fully understand Janice Gordon's art requires describing her environment, discussing individual pieces in detail, telling what she puts into each work, and observing how others view her work. I decided to schedule a trip to New York City to see Gordon in her own environs. I planned the trip to include the opening of the new Museum for African Art in Soho, with its first exhibit titled *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals.* The theme of the show coincidentally related to affinities between Gordon's works and tribal art.

I arrived in New York late on Thursday, February 11, 1993 and proceeded to Gordon's studio/apartment the next morning. Gordon lives and works on 10th Street near 5th Avenue, which is part of Greenwich Village and a beautiful section of the city. Her neighborhood has been designated an historical landmark area and Gordon lives on the fifth floor of a brownstone built in 1846. We spent the morning talking over tea. Then I walked around the studio and living quarters taking pictures and studying the surroundings.

Gordon's living room is filled with art and objects from both Western and non-Western cultures. There are expressionistic paintings on the walls, an African Akuaba doll on the window sill, Middle Eastern vases on a shelf, and brightly colored objects from other cultures neatly arranged on a lace-covered coffee table.

The studio portion is very neat, clean, and orderly. The natural light streams in from the skylights above and one wall of windows. Gordon's art, both completed and in progress, is around

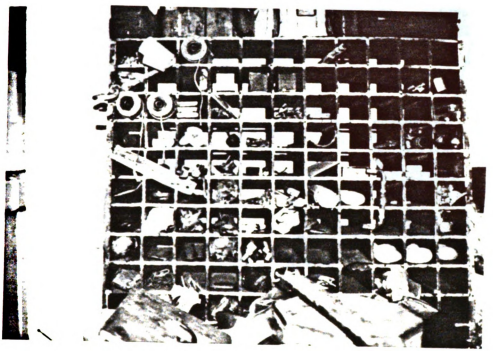

Figure 3. A storage unit in Janice Gordon's studio.

the walls and on shelves. Her library fills one wall with an interesting array of books, many on artists from a variety of cultures. Shelves and cubicles hold antique books and many found objects with intriguing surfaces. On the back wall is a large grid-like storage cabinet (Figure 3) that could pass for one of her artworks. It contains rustic materials that may later find their way into her works of art. Other artifacts that closely resemble her art sit around the shelves (Figure 4). The visual affinities are so close that often it is difficult to distinguish which objects she has collected and which she created. A large work table occupies the center of the room.

The well-organized rustic space is conducive to her many

Figure 4. A shelf in Janice Gordon's studio.

hours of work each day . Gordon prefers the daylight hours from 8:15 to 5:30. She takes a break around 11:00 each morning to call or visit her 98 year old neighbor, Rolf, on the first floor. Their relationship of ten years appears to be symbiotic. They equally care for and watch out for each other. Rolf fills Gordon in each day on news of the world and Gordon shares her activities with him. They are each other's "touchstone" to the outside world. I was fortunate enough to meet Rolf while I was there. The three of us ended up singing to sheet music from the thirties or forties, while Rolf played the piano. The atmosphere was warm and nostalgic. He is a delightful and interesting man.

Because I had expressed an interest in meeting some other contemporary women artists, Gordon arranged for me to meet a friend of hers. After lunch, Gordon and I went to visit Lenore Tawney at her studio apartment. Tawney is 85 years old; like Rolf she may be old in years, but not in spirit. Tawney, well known for her innovations in fiber art, is still a practicing artist. In the fall of 1992 a mutual painter friend introduced Gordon to Tawney. He brought Tawney to Gordon's studio and the two women felt an immediate connection. Simultaneously, both had been producing very similar constructions of boxes, collages, and assemblages. Tawney's art uses found natural objects such as rocks, feathers, eggs, shells, and bones. These organic objects are mystical and magical symbols that become transformed into a spiritual realm. They tell stories which enable the viewer to contact the soul. These stories are to guide the viewer through the complexities of life as a method of learning. (Mangan, 16) Throughout Tawney's studio are many bundled hanging potions, both large and small. These represent healing power, much like so-called fetishes and talismans. Much of Tawney's art is secretive and hidden, i.e., the bundle ingredients, hidden mysterious writing, and unseen assemblages within drawers.

One of Tawney's art works that I saw in her studio, *Collage Chest*, (Figure 5) was in her *Retrospective* in 1990. The wooden chest has fifty drawers. Each holds an assemblage or found object. In order for the viewer at the exhibit to be able to see all of the art within, the American Craft Museum commissioned a pneumatic device that would alternately open and close the drawers. The

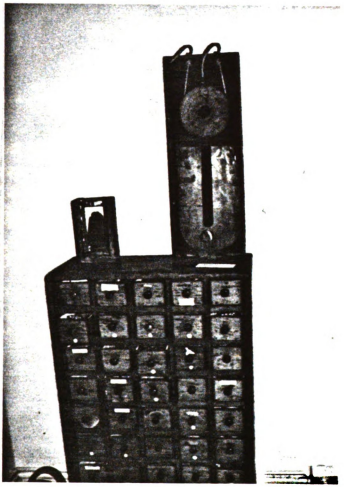

Figure 5. Lenore Tawney. *Collage Chest.*

device cost $10,000. When the show was over, Tawney could not stand the noise the machine made, so she threw the device out.

Gordon's reaction to the whole idea of having a mechanical apparatus was also negative. She felt a contraption would take away from the power of the piece. There would be no more mystery. Instead, Gordon thought that there should be more connection with

Figure 6. A glass shelf in Lenore Tawney's studio.

the viewer by having different drawers open each day. In that way, the viewer would have to return to have more revealed. There would be the immediacy of discovery. The personal interaction that takes place between the viewer and the sculpture is an important element in both artists' works. The two artists have many things in common that connect both their work and their spirits.

Figure 7. Lenore Tawney's studio.

Even though their artwork is similar in some respects, Tawney's studio apartment is quite different from Gordon's. To get to her studio, you must take an elevator to the fifth floor. As the door of the elevator opens, a beautiful glass wall (Figure 6) directly opposite a small entryway greets you. Looking through the glass, you see many shelves filled with small ceramics and priceless artifacts. After you remove your shoes, you turn to the right and enter a temple-like space. Tawney's studio is 4,000 square feet with varnished white floors and artwork everywhere (Figure 7). There are her new and old pieces -- her hanging clouds and interesting crates that house her work. During my visit she took great delight in opening a crate constructed for her *Retrospective.*

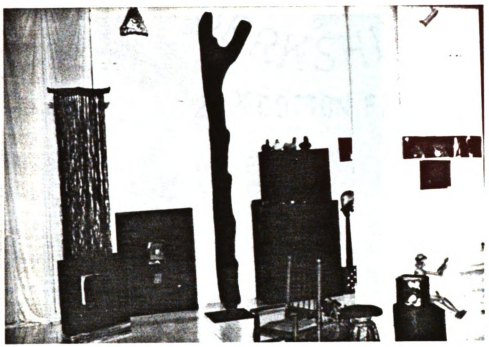

Figure 8. A ladder from Mali in Lenore Tawney's studio.

It is a compartmentalized container that holds small boxes with miniature assemblages inside. Each container is a new discovery.

Interspersed throughout the studio are Tawney's art and objects she has collected from around the world. On one wall are her own works in progress next to a ladder from Mali (Figure 8). A series of shelves houses neatly arranged wooden hat forms. Several interesting contemporary art pieces from ceramic pots by Toshiko Takaezu to Hannelore Baron's collages take up wall and floor space. Tawney practices meditation, so her space is both inviting and contemplative, a combination of chaos (collective work areas) and order. The similarities between Gordon's and Tawney's studios are apparent. They both have a love of texture, assemblage, the

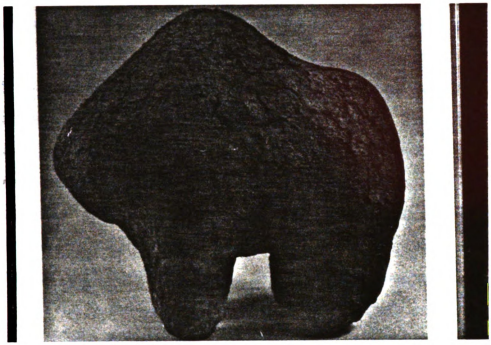

Figure 9. Altar (boli), Bamana, Mali, earth, organic, 18 " h. Collection: Gilbert Marhoefer.[17]

symbolic, the spiritual, and objects from other cultures.

The next day, Gordon, Tawney and I spent the entire day together. Gordon and I first met Tawney at the Museum for African Art in Soho. Tawney telephoned Jackie Winsor, a well-known contemporary sculptor, to join us for the festivities marking the opening of the museum's new location with its first exhibition, *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. The four of us began our self-directed tour along with crowds of other visitors. Winsor is not particularly drawn to African art, but her sculpture does display a physicality of materials and her cubes contain an

[17] The Museum for African Art, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* exhibit.

energy of secretness within that has been compared to the African or tribal arts. (Johnson 11) Winsor commented that she preferred Paleolithic to African art. She spoke of an ancient sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that really intrigued her. She described it as a rhinoceros-like form, caked with mud. Inside the piece were many gems. No sooner had she finished describing the work than we saw a nearly identical piece in the African display. The object was an altar (*boli*) from Mali (Figure 9). To me, this was further testimony of the ways in which affinities transcend cultures and time. Affinities may derive solely from a universal soul.[18]

The mood of the museum was dramatically created by the atmosphere of darkened rooms and warmly painted walls. We walked around separately, taking in the beautiful examples of the richness of African art. The exhibit illustrated the interest some African peoples have in secrecy. In many traditional African societies, the honor of being informed is a privilege reserved only for the initiated or chosen few. (Biedelman 47) Westerners seem to value the opposite -- that everyone should know everything. We feel cheated if someone hides something from us. Much of the actual meaning of various African objects will never be revealed beyond their own society or even their individual owner.

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[18]Like Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious, there are patterns of behavior that are identical to all. Two events that appear to be coincidental, may actually be unrelated instances of the existence of archetypes. (Jung "Synchronicity" 36) Many such incidences have occurred in writing this paper. They include the apparent serendipity of my happening upon an artist whose work so perfectly answered the needs of my topic, and the similarities between her work and the *Secrecy* exhibition and the current (September 1993-January 1994) *Face of the Gods* exhibition at the Museum for African Art. The latest exhibit Gordon noticed because it so closely ties the spiritual aspects of African traditions to altars and art. It continues the parallels as it links the African and African-American ritual. Gordon at once finds an affinity to this art in her own work.

It was inspiring to be in the company of three successful New York women artists. To be viewing African art with artists whose work holds, in my mind, some affinities to the tribal made the experience even more fitting. We stood in one of the galleries surrounded by wonderful examples of African three-dimensional art, discussing everything from a woman artist's survival to individual works in the exhibit. One piece we all responded to was a nail power (*nkisi*) figure, a Vili two-headed dog from Zaire (Figure 10) that had been created by the interaction of many individual participants. When nails are implanted in the figure, the piece

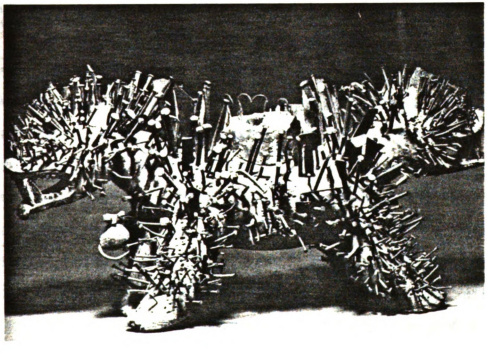

Figure 10. Two-headed dog, Vili, Zaire, wood, resinous mass, metal, 13 3/4 " h. Collection: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.[19]

[19] The Museum for African Art, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* exhibit.

generates healing power, conceptually much like many of Tawney's and Gordon's works.

Tawney took my arm and we continued to walk around the exhibit. I remarked on how the raffia hanging down from one of the masks reminded me of the hanging fibers of her "Cloud" series. She remained silent but appeared to agree and to be fascinated by both the aesthetics and the information on each piece. Gordon paired up with Winsor and viewed works on her own. She particularly enjoyed the mud altar (*boli*) from Mali. The magic and mystical character of each piece pervaded the museum. The moving setting and the enigmatic quality of the objects created a mood that made the observer feel enveloped by a spiritual presence.

Later that evening, Gordon, Tawney and I went to a ritual evening with the Mob of Angels, a group of women who conduct ritual healing. Tawney was in the performance. She exemplified age as she danced in with a young girl. Among the activities were drumming, the showing of images (slides) of fertility goddesses, readings, chanting, and the playing of instruments by the men and women in the audience. We had brought along African rattles bought earlier at the museum. The evening was a perfect conclusion to a day in which we all experienced the spiritual blending of cultures.

This weekend was devoted to a sharing of women artists who felt an affinity to each other through their art and spirituality. Why was this time together so enriching? We all were able to communicate with each other through some commonality that we shared -- a deeper understanding of art and humanity that makes the world a smaller place.

Gordon's art communicates by reaching an inner level that is common to all and can be experienced universally. In order to more fully explain what Gordon's art is about, I will discuss some of her constructions in depth. In 1989 Gordon completed her first construction, *Amylum* (Figure 2).[20] The art collector referred to in Chapter 3, whose impressive collection includes both European and African art, bought *Amylum*, which he placed next to a Paul Klee painting. *Amylum* is a square wooden puzzle-like box with pieces fitted together at right angles like a parquet floor. A removable front panel contains a central hidden passageway. Within the inner

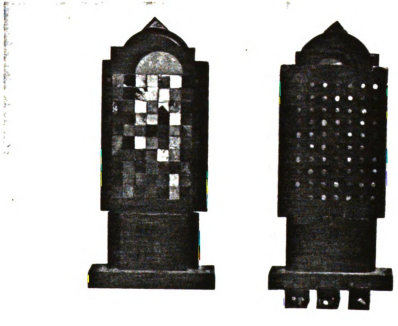

Figure 11. Janice Gordon. 1991. *Celestial Switchboard.* 32x14 3/4 x 3 3/4 "

[20] Except for *Abbaya*, all the works I will discuss were in the University of Michigan exhibit entitled *Recent Constructions.*

chamber is another box, filled with scrolls. The scrolls are prayers, paintings, and collages done by Gordon and other artist friends at Gordon's request. In an inner box that serves as a "healing chamber," there are seven scrolls dipped in beeswax. The back panel is the same as the front with the addition of the Greek letters *Chi* and *Rho*, which mean harmony and resolution.

None of Gordon's works exist on a purely aesthetic level. They all have many levels of meaning and involve interaction with the viewer, both while they are being created and after. An example of such a piece is *Celestial Switchboard*, 1991 (Figure 11). The original title of this work was *Palimpsest*, which means a tablet written on more than once after being erased. A hidden panel slides out of the top of this work. While Gordon was working on this construction in her studio, a woman visited her. The woman's grandson had a math learning disability, and she saw this work as the child trying to put the universe in order. Gordon wrote a prayer with pastels on the hidden slate to the woman and her grandson, then covered the writings with quick spontaneous painterly strokes. The slate became a reservoir for private prayers and notations for anyone who wished to use it.

Celestial Switchboard has 70 polychrome pegs on the front, arranged in rows. Beneath the pegs are boxes of pastels to use for writing on the removable tablet. On the back is a grid of colored squares (made from antique book covers) that are a rearrangement of the colors on the front. The different configuration denotes change. The piece illustrates the idea that we desire change but cannot alter the nature of the existing elements. Gordon reflects, "It reminded

me of a switchboard keying into a higher power. When people pray, they are asking for a transformation; if the connection with a higher power is made, something changes physically." (Pollard 7)

This work, like her others, is complex and layered. The viewer needs to interact and participate with it in order to find new meaning and depth. Gordon only suggests; the viewer must then carry on her/his own investigation and interpretation. Gordon only implants an idea. The viewer needs to respond from her/his own experience.

At the University of Michigan Museum of Art exhibit *Recent Constructions*, a small group of about fifteen members participated in a discussion led by the museum's director, Bill Hennessey. Hennessey asked questions about the works with few references to Gordon's own statements. The interpretations and responses provoked varied thoughts. One piece that generated much discussion was *Protect Me*, 1992 (Fig.12). The window-like construction is symmetrical with found natural objects from fish and birds hidden in slots invisible to the observer. Gordon's statement provided little information about this piece, but the viewers in the group had no trouble arriving at their own interpretations. Almost everyone felt the central object, an armor-like torso of leather, appeared ominous and powerful. It is uncertain whether the glass that covers this object is there to protect the object or the viewer. Or perhaps it is not a figure but a shovel with ashes. Also under the glass are symmetrically paired objects bound together and to the central piece. Would they leave if they could, or are they supporting the central piece? There is a sense of being bound, an element of

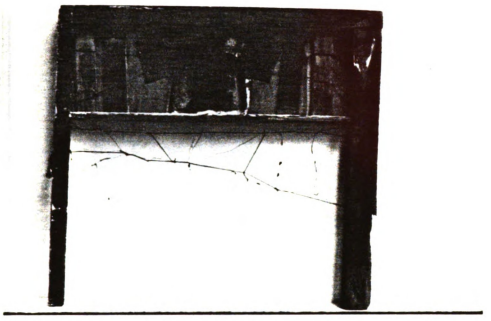

Figure 12. Janice Gordon. 1992. *Protect Me.* 30x33".

restraint. Directly below the glassed-in area is an asymmetrical group of tied wires. Are these barbed wires, cobwebs, or do they symbolize growth and freedom in contrast to the restricted upper portion? People seemed to relate readily to this work with a variety of evocative emotional responses.

Another piece that generated a moving response has an interesting story that now has a sequel. *Maxims and Instructions for the Boiler Room* , 1992 (Fig.13), is an assemblage composed of wood, antique book covers, and miscellaneous found objects. A front pocket contains postcard collages. In a back pocket is the narrative that follows:

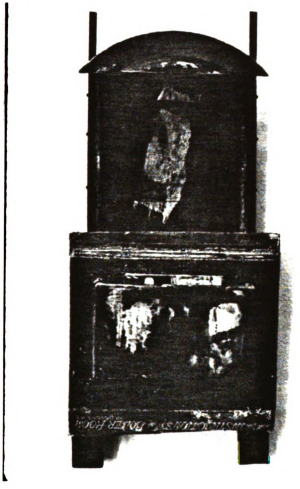

Figure 13. Janice Gordon. 1992. *Maxims and Instructions for the Boiler Room.* 16 1/2x7 1/2x2 1/2".

My friend J.D. went on a trip around the world. She said she needed to get away and had always wanted to travel alone. But I got concerned when I began to receive postcards from her - I felt that she had something on her mind -- besides sight-seeing. She finally called me from Suez and told me that she had rendezvoused with someone on the trip: she wouldn't tell me anything about him, (he was married), she thought she loved him, it was as if he had a "patent on her heart" -- I remember those

> words exactly. She sounded frantic -- he told her that he loved her, found her completely unique and she satisfied something in him which no other woman had. "Only, " she said. "Only what?" I said. There was so much static on the line and she shouted that she would call me when she got to Zanzibar. She never called. I got a postcard from Zanzibar several weeks later but by then I had called Interpol. She had vanished from her hotel room. The police in Zanzibar eventually sent me her possessions. I made this assemblage from some of her things - a book she had been reading (*Maxims And Instructions For the Boiler Room*), parts of postcards she had sent me, notes from her diary. I still dream about her and in the dream, she is always in the night desert, wandering. (Recent Constructions)

The work was a moving memorial to her friend that left a strong emotional impact on me as well as others to whom I told the story. When I viewed the piece with Gordon, she said, "I don't always tell people this, but the story is composed of many truths, not just one -- the story is part of the piece, not an actual explanation of it." She had created a story composed of facts and details from a variety of people she had known into one fictional character. I did not know what to think. Part of me felt betrayed. Part thought that all art is fantasy -- why is this different? Friends to whom I revealed this secret had mixed reactions. I discussed with Gordon how I and others felt. She was not sure what she wanted to do, because now she was also doing other works (Figure 14) as a sequel to the story. Bits and pieces of the story -- more clues to the mystery of J.D. became the subject of a new series. When Gordon included two new works based on the J.D. story in the *Book, Box, Word* show, she decided to include a statement with the now three-part series. The statement read:

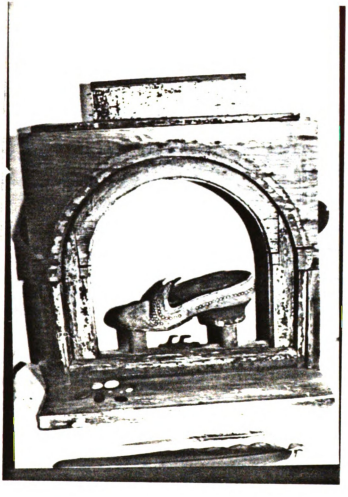

Figure 14. Janice Gordon. 1993. *The Turquoise Shoe,* J.D. series.

This is an ongoing story about J.D. who was traveling around the world with a secret lover and then disappeared in Zanzibar. The story is based on truth - that is, it was inspired by a real woman who traveled to Zanzibar and it is faithful to certain realities, but not all the aspects of the narrative conform with fact. (Letter 4 Jan 93)

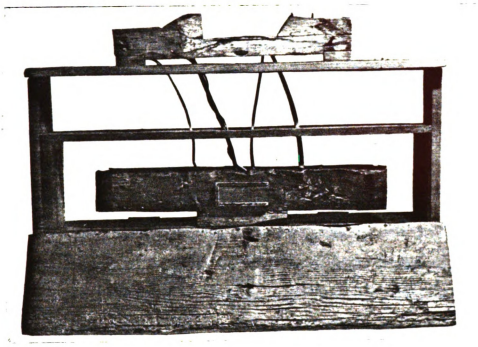

Figure 15. Janice Gordon. 1991. *Faith Is the Bird That Sings in the Night.* 22x29 1/2x7"

In a review of *Book, Box and Word*, a critic wrote of one of the new pieces in the J.D. series, *The Abbaya* , "There's a story here about beauty and danger ... the photographs ... are part of the tale, but they do not reveal very much of the mystery posed by the work. A journal entry hidden behind one of the photos, however, holds the key to the story." (Kohen 17)

The mystery and narrative continue, but elements remain secret. The strength of the piece relies on the unsaid portions. Gordon gives the impetus, but the viewer must follow through, in order to discover deeper meanings below the surface.

Janice Gordon's works often provoke a variety of reactions beyond their initial aesthetic impact. Sometimes a viewer connects in a way that conjures up a deep emotion. A final example of Gordon's art that rendered such a response is *Faith Is the Bird That Sings in the Night*, 1991 (Figure 15). It is a horizontal hinged wooden box that reveals mulberry branches and another inner small box. When the door to the smaller box slides open, one discovers a print of a bird. The idea behind the piece has to do with the paradox of the night sky remaining dark even though filled with stars. Gordon connects this to the idea of spiritual darkness, as when a person goes from resolution or brightness to puzzlement or mystery. The confusion shuts out the light until the door to the inner chamber opens to reveal information about an experience.

While Gordon was discussing this work in a talk she gave during the exhibition, a woman in the audience blanched as the door concealing the bird was opened. The woman explained later that for her, opening the door was like opening her inner chamber. It made her recall an experience in which she had been raped as a child. She felt someone had ripped it open and violated her soul.

For Gordon the meaning of opening the door was getting to a "point of faith beyond despair." It touched Gordon that a viewer could reach a different but equally powerful level of meaning. The viewer connected to the work with a strong response that may also have initiated the process of spiritual healing of an experience that formerly she had suppressed. The woman's exposure to the art may have helped her to heal. Gordon's goal in her art is to touch people on some inner level that is not always explicable.

An artist friend of mine also had an interesting response to this exhibit. She said that while she was there, she wished she could lie down on a bench and go to sleep. Then when she woke up, Gordon's works would be the first things she'd see -- "a powerful feeling." She wondered how Gordon was able to get inside her mind and know it that well. How could there be someone so much like herself and able to make things she wanted to make?

It is quite obvious that the art of Janice Gordon reaches people on a number of levels beyond the aesthetic. The assemblages function in many ways and have much to say. As in the work of tribal cultures, even though there is a very developed and sophisticated aesthetic nature, the real affinities lie on another, more conceptual spiritual plane.

In the brochure for the *Recent Constructions* exhibit, the University of Michigan Museum of Art's director William Hennessey compares Gordon's work to other twentieth century masters of collage and assemblage like Kurt Schwitters, Joseph Cornell, Pablo Picasso, and Louise Nevelson. (Hennessey Recent) Certainly, there is a formal affinity between these masters' works and Gordon's that is instantly visible. Beyond these visual affinities, there are conceptual similarities to the work of such contemporary Western artists as Tawney, Winsor, Graves, Samaras, and to the tribal arts.

In the next chapter, I will consider what these affinities might be. Are they conscious and intentional, or are they inevitable and unpredictable, universal impulses of humanity?

Chapter 5. Janice Gordon's work and other cultures: do affinities exist?

The power of magic and healing and the merging of the physical and spiritual worlds are the basis of Janice Gordon's found-object assemblages. Although there are many affinities between tribal art and Gordon's, both conceptually and formalistically, her intent does not involve what has been labeled "primitivism."[21]

In this final chapter, I will compare specific examples of Gordon's art with specific examples of the tribal. Where there are parallels, I will point them out and try to determine in what ways they are related; for example, are the same influences present in both? Are there any examples from the 1984 MOMA exhibit or other tribal exhibits that have true affinities to the work of this contemporary artist? Can one find affinities that are less superficial than purely aesthetic similarities? In my opinion, there is a deeper affinity in all art and all humanity that exists at the spiritual level. One experiences it but cannot always verbalize it. I will attempt to put these feelings into words.

The exhibition entitled *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, held in February 1993, included many examples of African art that show striking affinities to the work of Janice Gordon. The objects in this exhibition carry hidden spiritual power, an idea similar to that in the art of Gordon. In neither case does an art object function only as an aesthetic object. There is a deeper

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[21] The label"primitivism" may prove to be overused and non-effective. I use the word in the sense of its conceptual meaning, which appears to be less pejorative.

Figure 16. Memory board (lukasa), Luba, Zaire, wood, beads, metal, 13 3/8 " h. Private Collection, Washington, D.C.[22]

meaning and relevance to both Gordon's and tribal art -- a significance that is basic to all human spirit.

Of course, the visual similarities are the most obvious and easiest to identify. I hope to take the analysis to another level that

[22]The Museum for African Art, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* exhibit.

incorporates function, meaning, and impulse. In this instance, "primitive" has a very positive, elemental meaning. The viewer feels and experiences the objects rather than just viewing them. The works become integral parts of the lives of the artist and the participants.

Some of the objects from the *Secrecy* show and Janice Gordon's art have visual affinities. An example is the formal similarity between an African memory board (*lukasa*) (Figure 16) from the Luba in Zaire (Nooter 55) and Gordon's *Celestial Switchboard* (Figure11). The memory board is a three-dimensional vertical wooden rectangle with pegs on either side. Colored beads on the front of the board are reminiscent of the polychromatic pegs on the *Switchboard*, but the arrangement here is more haphazard. Like *Switchboard* , the backside of the memory board has a color scheme identical to the front with the beads placed in a geometric pattern.

The visual affinities are obvious but irrelevant, because one needs to discover whether there are any affinities beyond the formal. Other than the utilitarian[23] function of both pieces, to provide a continuing spiritual effect for the participant, the meanings and purpose of the two works appear to be quite different.

As discussed in the last chapter, *Switchboard* is a vehicle for prayers and healing. When a participant inserts a colored peg into the board, s/he says a prayer. S/he can also write her/his prayers and messages on the removable slate.

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[23] The utilitarian aspect of Gordon's work exists primarily in theory, because in Western fine art, function is not a consideration.

Figure 17. Figure (nkisi nkondi), Kongo, Zaire, wood, metal, 33 " h. Private Collection.[24]

The memory board from Zaire is not for devotional purposes, but is used rather as a ritualistic mnemonic device. Members of the highest level of the Luba king's court are the only ones who understand and use it. The beads serve as reminders of certain

[24]The Museum for African Art, *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals* exhibit.

proverbs, lists, and sayings related to the kingship. The orderly side is a codification of the taboos associated with the king.

Both pieces have a sense of privacy, interaction, and personalization. Both reorder similar elements into a more geometrically symmetric and symbolic design. There is, however, no real relation between the primary functions of the works.

Switchboard does relate functionally to another previously discussed African object in the Secrecy show, the *Two-Headed Dog* (*nkisi*) (Figure 10) from Zaire. The *Dog* is a nail power figure that stores medicines to heal the sick and maintain well-being in the community. A nail inserted into the power figure activates the secret ingredients that assist in healing. Another power figure (Figure 17) in the exhibit is a *nkisi nkondi.* The form is human and the figure is used in the same way. (Nooter 107) When a human being interacts with the object by pounding in a nail, the magic within is released and the wish or prayer is answered. How is this any different from a Christian icon, cross, or statue of Mary? In the case of *Switchboard* and the African power figure, the participant physically alters the inanimate object. Through multiple actions s/he transforms the appearance and effect of the sculpture. As the physical form changes, so does the spiritual power. When Gordon creates an artwork that assists in healing, she instills the object with symbolic power. It acts as a metaphor. When the African sculptor creates an object, he also instills the piece with special powers to serve the participant.

What about the materials used? Both Gordon and the African artist select natural materials. Gordon says of the materials she uses:

> Antique books contain the fingerprints not only of the hands but the minds and the spirits of the people who sought to enter into new worlds ... weathered wood holds bits of the rain and wind and snow which wore its surfaces ... and perhaps, it still holds imprints of the people who cut the wood and of course, some of the spirit of the tree from which it was cut. (Letter 7 Jan 92)

Gordon prefers natural organic materials to synthetic ones. She has a special preference for animals. In *Abbaya* she uses bluefish jaws. In *Inshallah* she hides a cat's eye (preserved by replacing the water with silicone) that a friend (professor of anatomy) obtained for her from a veterinary school. *Protect Me* has rodent skeletons found in owl castings. Animal body parts fascinate her. She uses them metaphorically, to ground her to reality. They have no specific meaning attached to them, other than being part of nature and the power of the universe.

Gordon uses natural materials that carry their own symbolism, but she then empowers them by implanting them in a new context and narrative that create new meaning. The tribal artist also uses natural materials and implants her/his own intrinsic magic that empowers the work. The material may have an animistic power within that increases its innate power. When Gordon creates a work, she has a specific story in mind from which the work evolves. The meaning she gives the piece does not, however, need to be the same or even closely related to the message discovered by the

viewer. The piece changes as the viewer interprets it according to her/his own experiences. In contrast, the tribal artist may have a specific purpose and meaning attached to the codification of the work and its iconography that is the same for all who view it. Once the sculpture fulfills its function, it no longer has meaning or purpose.

Gordon is very much interested in the idea of materials being transformed into a spiritual realm, a concept akin to that held by tribal artists. There is an iconography with religious significance in both Gordon's work and tribal cultures that allows the objects to transcend the aesthetic. While the formalistic aspects of the works remain highly important, their content provides a deeper level of meaning and complexity. For an object to function requires that a viewer interact with it. The object must have a viewer to be real. The artist implants a meaning that the viewer interprets. The viewer then decides how to digest this meaning and how it is relevant to her/him. The participation of the spectator provides the culminating reason for the work's existence.

In an African *nkisi*, medicines composed of natural ingredients are implanted in the sculpture. The contents produce remedies to do such things as purge an illness or aid in childbirth. Each substance serves a specific function or cure. The designated components become a recipe for particular results. For instance, ground-up crickets are diuretics, ginger is an aphrodisiac. (MacGaffey 173) Each tradition codifies the makeup. When a client requests a certain cure, a diviner performs a ritual and prepares a potion that will release a spiritual force for that particular result. Much

thought and experience connect the specific medicine with the request. The symbolic relationship is part of the tradition. (MacGaffey 174)

While Gordon may assign a specific function to any object, each individual brings her/his own interpretation and meaning to how s/he uses the objects. Sometimes the participant may not even be aware of all the objects or ingredients within a work. Gordon is analogous to the African specialist in the sense that she is the one who determines the content. The main difference is that the meanings can change with Gordon's pieces. The potions accommodate the needs of each observer without themselves being changed.

When comparing the Vili *nkisi* in the Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin to the art of contemporary Western artists, Rubin points out in the *Primitivism* catalog that the African "fetish" (a term not always acceptable today) has communal tenets. The believers understand the metaphoric significance. Contemporary Western art objects more often hold personal meanings. The artist and the observer interpret from their own experience rather than one held by an entire group. (Rubin "Introduction" 68) These individual interpretations are important to Gordon's pieces. She sees them as contributing to the magical power and spiritual influence of her works.

Gordon says of her materials, "The materials are embedded with people's spirits and the effects of weather and age ... I could never create those effects myself." (Green F2) Gordon believes that her art is not as literal as African art. She does not believe her

materials have intrinsic power. Her art has power only because of the meaning infused by the juxtaposition of materials. Is this really unlike the tribal artist who selects materials associated with special power or magic? The tribal materials are chosen for specific innate associations.

One of Gordon's constructions, *What If It Should Fail?*, 1991, has affinities to an African Chokwe diviner's basket. Over one hundred articles that include many objects found in nature, such as bones, horns, honeycombs, and bird beaks fill the diviner's basket. The diviner shakes the basket and reads the results to foretell the future.

What If It Should Fail? also incorporates many natural elements that are instrumental in directing the future of the participant. Gordon describes the character of some of these objects as:

> ominous: horse hair spears, a charred mulberry branch, gunshot, a bee's nest. The objects can remain hidden or can be handled, exposed, rearranged at will. There is also a pouch that contains rodent skeletons from an owl casting -- that portion of the night's hunt which the owl literally casts out because it is not nurturing to him. (Recent Constructions)

These forbidding objects are counterparts to a group of mulberry branches lying on a shelf inside the piece. According to ancient Chinese philosophy, mulberry shoots ensure success. When cut down, the mulberry tree grows new roots to sustain itself. A Chinese ritual involves tying objects to mulberry branches to protect and strengthen the participant against the dangers of the outside world. A reading in the *I Ching* promoting caution and inner

strength gained from Confucius' parable of the mulberry tree inspired *What If It Should Fail?*

In neither the diviner basket nor *What If It Should Fail?* does the interaction with the objects tell the participant what to do. The objects merely reveal possible solutions for the receiver to perceive. Because of the universal meanings and associations connected with the natural objects, they transmit a magical potency, but the objects are empowered only when the viewer participates and spiritually interacts with them.

The *Primitivism* exhibit at the MOMA purported to widen the Western experience of art by including other cultures. For me, the exhibit did little to broaden our understanding of other cultures. It displayed numerous objects that were visually appealing to Modernists, but failed to explain them. Instead of merely showing similarities in various art objects supposedly derived from more "primitive" cultures, it would seem to me more relevant to point out that these similarities existed simultaneously. There are innumerable affinities, both visual and conceptual, that have no boundaries of time or location and that exist independently from one another.

Gordon summarizes the enticement of the primitive in the following:

> The best of primitive art holds a particular emotional, spiritual force, which is derived from the deep beliefs of the people who made the art (the sculpture from Africa, the dreamings of the Australian aborigines, the masks from New Guinea) -- all the best of this art is particularly moving, because it stills holds the intense intentions of its makers and its original audience. It

> gave meaning to people's lives, and our Western urbanized audience responds to that force ... an order and meaning to the universe. Art has to do with the basic issues of life and death and suffering and sin and retribution and redemption and relationship -- fundamental issues that are often buried in a modern culture which tries to divert us from these issues with high technology and instant access to anything (except things like wisdom which refuses instant access). (Letter 20 Feb 93)

The art of Janice Gordon often uses natural materials as narrative, also a frequent element in tribal art. Another Chinese parable dealing with man's suffering caused by his self-inflicted oppression inspired her work *Benefication*, 1991. Gordon states, "I have adapted the parable and extended it, taking the man through seven stages to a final point of redemption." Each of the seven panels contains a collaged engraving of an abstracted drawing of a man as he and the story evolve. The shutters at either end of the piece hide the actual written story. The piece becomes an allegory of man's universal fate.

Much tribal art is also narrative and symbolic. Carved wood and ritual accumulation comprise a Yoruba *Oshe Shango Staff*. The sculpture represents the story of Shango, the powerful thunder god, and his wife, Iyamode. The tale explains the transference of universal power to the King of Oyo, a potent Yoruba mortal. He supplicates to both Shango and Iyamode. The sculpture illustrates the codified posture and expression of Iyamode, where she kneels with her hands on her breasts -- the vehicle for transmitting her power to a human. A Shango follower would carry this staff during a ceremony or his family would keep it as a relic. (Long 4) In tribal

art the narrative is supported by the visual quality, but the primary function is content and that supersedes all else. (Long 2)

All Janice Gordon's work contains aspects of ritual, narrative and natural materials. These are also ingredients essential to the continuance of mankind, and they are all lacking in much of today's society. Jung talks about the symbolic images and myths that have survived since ancient beings. These have remained unchanged and exist in both tribal societies and the technological world. (Jung Man 106) The spiritual element has been prominent throughout the ages, and has been a necessary vehicle for explaining the unexplainable. Joseph Campbell discusses "the invisible plane that supports the visible ... what we don't know supports what we do." These invisible forces guide society. Campbell feels that young people today do not know how to behave because these forces are not present in their lives. It is the artist's role to visualize these concepts and to act as a shaman in transmitting them. (Campbell video) The object becomes the symbolic mediator between human beings and God. (Jung Man 96)

Affinities do exist between Janice Gordon's art and the art of other cultures. These are evident and basic. Mankind will always search for meaning and order. Art continues to serve as its instrument.

Janice Gordon's work exemplifies a current stream in art that duplicates the same practices as primitive cultures but for different ends. Many contemporary Western artists are once again searching to express themselves. They are seeking a means to get back to the basics, away from the artificial and superficial art of a

technological era. One culture is not mimicking the other, but both evolve from a common need to survive and understand the meaning of life. In my opinion, if we do not pay attention to more communal attitudes and continuation, we will ultimately self-destruct. Cultures need to accept and observe each other in order to become conscious of the larger picture. They can learn to acknowledge supernatural forces that are basic to nature and all mankind by allowing differences in interpretation. Diverse cultures must eventually intertwine for the endurance of man and art.

Although multiculturalism and the idea of a global society continue to be discussed today, how closely are we really investigating "other" peoples? It appears to me that although we continue to examine and try to understand, we do so at arm's length. The same thing that attracts us to different cultures also drives us away. We want to know what they possess that appears to be missing in our industrialized society. How could tribal people produce such complex art? To justify our interest, we feel obligated to at least give lip service to an inspection of the art of different cultures. We need not be afraid to accept the "other," whether the motivation is curiosity, brotherly love, or expanded knowledge. Gordon's involvement with other cultures is evident in her work and life through her incorporation of world religions and philosophies.

To compare Western art to the African is understandable, but one is not necessarily derived from the other. The similarities may be those that coexist as common impulses. As cultures overlap, hopefully one day there will be a universal appreciation for art found

throughout the world. We will begin to understand and learn from each other.

Will humans ever stop the search for ways to communicate on a level that knows no boundaries? Is there something inherent in all humanity that defies all explanation but continues to serve? How does the spiritual world direct our lives? Is there a limitation to form that is dependent on environment and a degree of sophistication, or is it unlimited? Can the art of unlike cultures be effectively compared? Is any art really primitive, or is all art primitive? The answer may depend only on how we define the word "primitive." People will continue to react, interpret, communicate, and be inspired by the art of tribal peoples.

I believe that there is an instinctive universal spirituality that is inherent to all humanity. Unfortunately, a society based on the rational mind does not always accept this concept. It views the spiritual as being backward rather than advanced. If something is unexplainable, people discount it rather than looking to a higher spiritual source. Until the fast-paced technological world is willing to slow down long enough to examine its spiritual side, it will never understand its true nature or universal self. It will always be searching for the essence of life, whether it labels it as "primitivism" or some other less controversial term.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

LIST OF SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

1992

Recent Constructions, University of Michigan Museum of Art. Ann Arbor, Michigan

Book, Box, Word, North Miami Center for Contemporary Art, Miami, Florida

HRCA at the Hammond, a juried exhibition by Hudson River Contemporary Artists, Hammond Museum, North Salem, New York

The Book is Art, Renee Fotouhi Fine Art East, East Hampton, New York

Nine Artists at St. Gabriel's Court, New York City

Selected Works, Esok-Lanza Fine Art, New York City

1991

Chords and Discords, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York

Assemblage and Collage: 7 Artists, Stephen Haller Fine Art, New York City

War and Peace, Center For Book Arts, New York City

1990

Altered States (3 Person Show), Stephen Haller Fine Art, New York City

Hudson River Museum 75th Anniversary Exhibition, Sculpture Award, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York

Small Works Show, Washington Square East Gallery, New York City

1989

New York Feminist Art Institute Annual Exhibit, New York City

Goddess Festival Art Exhibit, New York Open Center, New York City

1988

Works of the Spirit, Ceres Gallery, New York City

Summer Workshop Exhibition, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Massachusetts

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