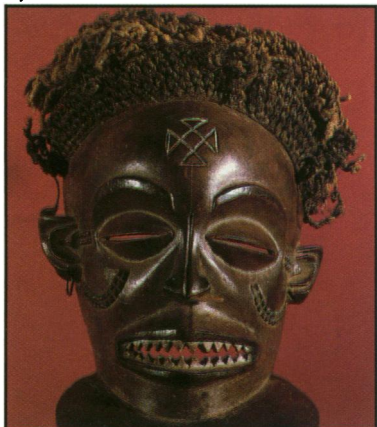


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Male mask, Chokwe tribe, Angola, courtesy Jacqueline Spiegel, San Francisco.

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BARRY A. KITNICK

dialogue

"SOCIAL CONTROL" AND THE ELEPHANTS WE SCHOLARS MAKE

Mande people have a deft way of describing insubstantial or unaccomplished people. They liken such individuals to elephants so light they can be carried on one's shoulders. Since the study of other cultures allows us to compound our insights and experience with theirs, I want to alter the Mande perception a bit and use it to reflect upon certain of our scholarly activities. When we think and write about African art we build elephants of our ideas that subsequently roam the heady terrain of academe, to gain weight or dissipate on the fare of the day. Our elephants are distortions, creations inflated from the materials we find, but that is neither good nor bad by definition. Much depends upon the company they keep and on the way they assert themselves in their herds.

That scholars distort as they distill is no surprise to any of us, and it need not lead to problems. It can generate valuable insights, inspiration for new angles of research, and nuances of understanding that we all pursue in our efforts to know art better. And so we deconstruct, unpack, pull apart, and peer most closely at the segments of the whole

that interest us. Ideally we extract those little parts with care and then expand them with attentive contemplation so that in fact the pachyderms we make also expand the horizons of our discipline.

Few of us ever really deflate these gossamer elephants; we don't tend to focus our attention on putting the parts back into the whole. More frequently we leave our distortions in the field and move along. But that is also not necessarily a problem. I can read the new data and thoughts my colleagues publish, and meld them into avenues of inquiry defined by my own special interests and objectives. Thus a second elephant arises, and, as many scholars do the same, an entire herd grows up. When enough parts of the whole have been expanded we achieve some measure of balance, a broad constellation of perspectives that helps reduce the effects of our individual distortions.

I don't mean objectivity. That, we know, is an ideal it seems we human beings were not designed to embrace. Nevertheless it is our inescapable charge to be as accurate and true to the art and its users as is humanly possible—to try, that is, to measure up to the worthy intentions objectivity suggests. Therein lies the value of dialogue between colleagues

from different fields and from different areas of our own discipline, between scholars of different generations and different bents of mind. Thus we march our herds forward.

Sometimes, however, we seem to get stuck in an odd distortion, a stylization of valid thought that throws dust before our perception and does the field no good at all—a bull elephant, as it were. One such stylization has dogged us too long. I'm thinking of "social control," a well-worn phrase that was no doubt intended to be a kind of shorthand for a collection of thoughts about how societies work and how people use art, but which has, I believe, become a subterfuge that creates gaps between us and the works we strive to comprehend. "Social control" is perhaps one of those elephants that should no longer be throwing their weight around.

Old sociology texts suggest that the phrase was initially used as an analytical abstraction, a valuable insight that offered scholars a new angle of deliberation. Sometimes we hit upon such revelations, which then reside in our minds as keys to understanding, and one wonders how we ever did without them. But as our ways of looking at people and art have grown more sophisticated, this phrase has progressively lost its relevance. At the same time it has lost its fundamental contact with the data that inspired it. So it has descended first into a realm of descriptive terminology and convention, where the radiance of its initial revela-



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tion grew dim and less helpful, and then down to the realm of misleading distortion, where the phrase has become an impediment to our ability to approach the perceptions of local perspectives. I fear that in a great many cases the statement we make with "social control" in no way resembles what people actually think they are doing with the collection of ideas, acts, and artworks so pigeonholed by us.

Still, we continue to make that statement, perhaps less frequently than in years past, but often enough to create trouble. We seem to assume we all know what we mean by it, and that the meaning will be the same to our audiences. So what do we think when we find "social control" referring to people using masks, for example, in ways that influence others' behavior? I think we fail to give it much thought at all. We see the phrase and register a kind of complacent "Oh, that's what's going on," which is devoid of any real comprehension, or maybe even any real interest.

Am I making a big deal about something that is not very consequential? I don't think so. If our task is indeed to translate as precisely as possible what we learn of art over there in ways that make it comprehensible (and also worth knowing about) to people over here, then it is just this sort of thing that is worthy of our attention. Could we argue that the phrase constitutes a convenient means of facilitating communication by avoiding the need to explicate all those boring data? Again, I don't think so. My contention, as you will see, is that the phrase all too frequently facilitates the generation of misunderstanding, and that there may be a richness we are missing in those data that can provide us with newer and more useful insights, if we examine them more carefully.

Perhaps some readers will respond by suggesting that the phrase "social control" is like the word "art." The people we interview might not use "social control" to describe the effects of their works of art, but many of them also might not apply "art" to the sculpture we so insistently discuss in art publications and display in museums. It calls to mind a statement Arnold Rubin once made as a discussant on a College Art Association panel. If it walks on four legs and urinates on trees, he said (though not in those exact words), then no matter what anybody calls it, it's a dog. In the judgment of Arnold and many others, after careful consideration of our experiences with those objects and our conversations with people who make and use them, our word "art" can indeed be applied appropriately to them. (Besides, more and more frequently researchers are discovering African-language words used very much as we use our word "art.")

I see no correlation between the concept Arnold Rubin so effectively championed and what I am discussing now. When I stop to consider the phrase "social control" in conjunction with African masks, figures, or other types of sculpted characters, for example, it suggests to me a process of coercion through

the public enactment of satire or ridicule, or the invocation of spirit beings or occult forces. The emphasis is thus on control, on wills bent to the wills of others, on rules from which there is no escape and traditions that are inherently conservative and inflexible.

That may be an overstatement, but it is nevertheless the impression given. And if we tried to argue that we insiders all know what we mean by "social control," we would rapidly discover the same sorts of misapprehensions that make words like "primitive" and "tribe" so dangerous. Besides, we insiders write not just for ourselves, but also in the hopes that others will read our work and gain from it.

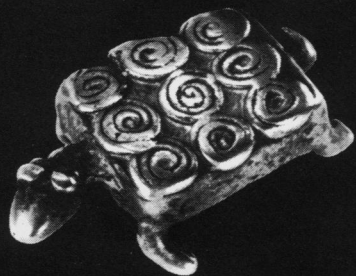
That is a point worth dwelling on a moment. Certainly scholars write for each other, as colleagues engaged in a joint venture. But we also write for our younger colleagues, our students who will have to spend some time discovering for themselves the odd histories and convoluted ramifications of our terminology. That discovery is not always easy. Just after I returned from my dissertation research in Mali, in the early 1970s, I went to a party of graduate anthropology students in New Haven and found myself expounding vigorously to one of them on the evils of using the word "tribe." He was quite convinced we all knew what we meant by that word, until it suddenly dawned on him that he actually had no idea himself. Similar revelations about various words have struck

me often enough, and still do. Even as scholars we are still often creatures of habit, and sometimes habits get the best of us. That very danger lurks in the jaws of our phrase "social control," and if it threatens us, the younger and older members of this fraternity of humanists, imagine its effect on museum visitors and readers who come from other walks of life to enjoy themselves and learn something about art and the human condition. As certainly as we write for each other we also write for these people, and they have the right to engage their own wit and reason with the best we have to offer. This sounds like moralizing, I know, but perhaps it is excusable. After all, most of us do this kind of work for the love of it, for the thrill we get from all the subtle and marvelous things that African art can be. Shouldn't we share that wealth as best we can?

When I consider Mande situations to which I might apply "social control," I do not find the same emphasis on constraint or on rules or inflexible tradition that I feel we derive from the phrase. In public masquerade performances I have attended, for example, I have seen dance characters and heard songs that indeed overflow with satire and ridicule, that jab and mock and needle and roast along a continuum from gentle humor to something far more potent. At the same performances I have heard songs and observed masquerade dancers' behaviors designed to encourage exemplary patterns of citizenship.

But my observations of these events and my conversations with sculptors, dancers, and audience members do not lead me to the negative innuendoes of "social control." Rather I see emphasis on education and development, on personal growth and fulfillment, on reasonable and flexible responsibilities individuals have to family and neighbors and community, and on the usefulness of many beliefs and values that do indeed stand civilization in good stead. One might challenge this interpretation by pointing out the resentment younger people may feel toward older people who wield authority grounded in those beliefs and values. True enough. But the dance and masquerade arenas also offer youth the opportunity to fling the same degree of satire and ridicule at those elders, in the context of social processes by which youth can accrue authority.

To gloss all this with "social control" would be, I think, to mislead myself and my readers. It would mask much of the creativity involved in the performances—not just the creativity that flows from the formal construction of artistic events, but the equally impressive and intimately related social creativity that can make art so dynamic a force in each new generation's and every single individual's fabrication of reality. When our writing mutes these features in the performance of African arts, we lose sight of one of art's most significant contributions to civilization.



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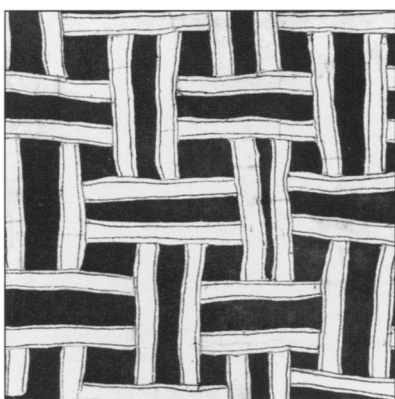
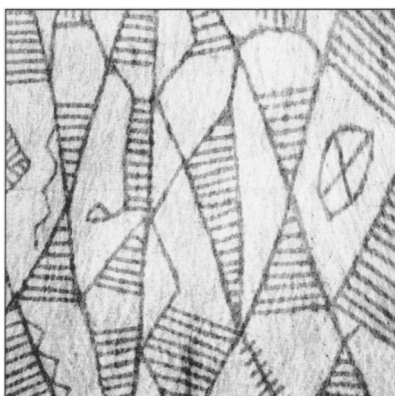
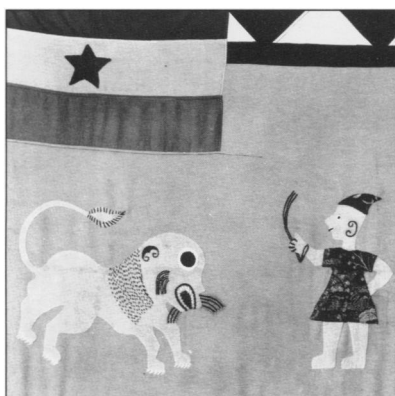
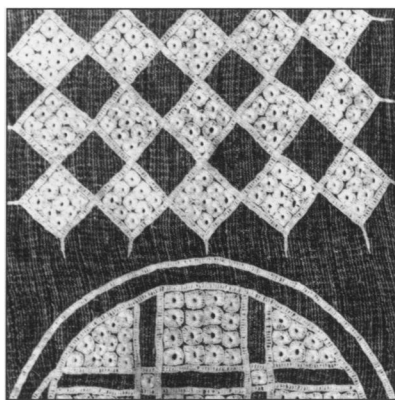
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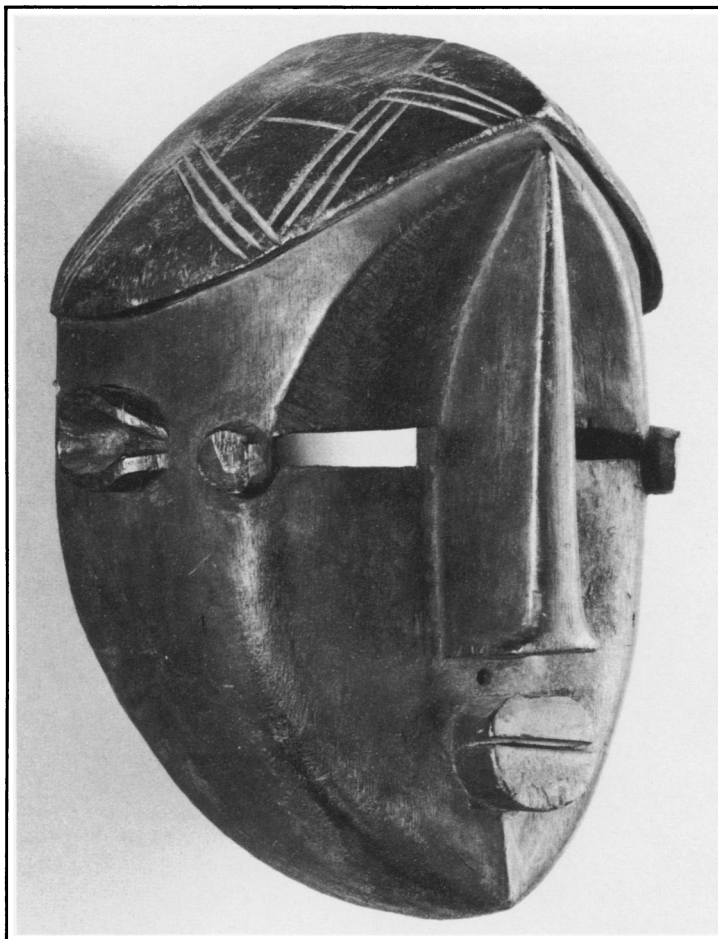
In the less public and more spiritually charged events that I have learned about but never attended, such as the performances of Komo masks, I hear about the importance of wholesome interaction between people, and the need for vitality in the social and natural affairs of a community. Children must be born and be healthy. Fields must be fertile and productive. People must compete, but not destroy each other in the process. Spirits and other forces of nature must be offered their due respect and harnessed to help make human life better. When individuals do ill, the ill must be abated and those individuals combated. But when the Komo association and its mask are enacted to engage in such combat, their actions, while awesomely powerful, are also viewed more in the light of creativity than control, or at least in a light that balances the two. These are vigorous acts that try to harness the world's great forces and manipulate them to providential ends. They do so on the basis of extensive and hard-earned collections of knowledge and expertise. I'm not inclined to soften their impact or twist their intentions with the bindings "social control" would provide.

More and more, the humanities and social sciences have taught us that in a very real sense the way we talk about things creates them. If that were not true the great majority of us would never have found the term "primitive" so repugnant. Modes of representation are powerful, and our minds are not so free as we might like to imagine. Metaphors and signifying terminology can divert us into patterns of thought as certainly as the media on which Marshall McLuhan expounded. We should, therefore, be careful about everything we say.

The very use of the phrase "social control" frames our interpretation of data, removing them from the wellsprings of their local realities and urging them toward meanings that are strictly or largely our own representations. Because we have the habit of imbuing our representations with considerable authority, the twists that deficient phrases encourage us to make can become extremely difficult to straighten out.

I also think there is a murkier path along which we may be traveling by embracing such a phrase. It leads toward that obtuse space that harbors the tired old notions of our discipline's past. After much careful deliberation and plenty of debate, we have learned that phrases such as "tribal styles" or "anonymous artists" stultified our comprehension of the artworks we study by embedding them in interpretations grounded in inadequate data. Certainly some of them were useful and helped move the field along. And even the least salutary among them still served as foils against which we might refine our thoughts. But we outgrew them, or transformed them into much richer ideas that serve us better.

Doesn't "social control" stultify in a similar sense, by encouraging us not to examine thoroughly enough or contemplate carefully enough the data we have gathered? We



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should transform it too. On the one hand we should take more care to offer rich descriptions and explanations of events involving works of art, with an eye toward including the beliefs, motivations, and personal experiences of individual participants, as well as the discrepancies between what the artworks and events are supposed to accomplish versus what happens in actual performances. On the other hand we should extrapolate from this fuller body of data richer and subtler concepts better suited to the wealth of social phenomena that spring from Africa's arts. It is time to put the simple notion of "social control" to rest with "primitive" and "tribe."

*Patrick R. McNaughton
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana*

RESOLVED: TO ACT FOR AFRICA'S HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PATRIMONY

It should come as a surprise to few that Africanist art historians and archaeologists are looking at each other with renewed interest. Prehistorians have awakened to the power of symbolic systems in the past. Art historians are experimenting with a more comprehensive definition of art that includes many items of material culture found in excavations. Many appreciate that those same excavations provide the context needed for the interpretation of ancient art. Both disci-

plines feel the severe loss to their subject matter caused by the hemorrhaging of Africa's cultural patrimony through the illicit art and antiquities commerce.

Because of that shared concern about the illicit traffic in objects, two art historians, Henry Drewal (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Kate Ezra (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), organized a plenary session and workshop on "Archaeology, Art, and the Art Market" at the biennial conference of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA), held in Gainesville, Florida, on March 22-25, 1990. This will primarily be a report on that panel and workshop and on the formal resolution concerning the art trade voted by the SAfA membership. However, other panels contained much to reinforce the impression of converging interests of art history and archaeology.

I begin with an impressionistic and very brief tour of the papers presented at Gainesville. At a time when the history of art is redefining what objects are appropriate for study, and at a time of growing interest in the instrumentality of art in social processes, what is to prevent art historians from casting their sights right back to the beginning of the human experience in Africa? Why should art historians be interested in the tooth marks of the extinct Plio-Pleistocene sabertooth, *Homotherium*, on the bones of its prey? The intense debate about the location and circumstances of the emergence of fully modern

Homo sapiens sapiens—what's in it for the art historian? Why should the patterns of burials and hut placement within central African cattle kraals in A.D. 1000 be a concern? What can the art historian learn from studies of how different elements of material culture are manipulated by subgroups in emerging complex societies? To me, all these questions point to common ground for archaeologists and art historians, indeed, to the reasons why our understanding of Africa's past will be fundamentally constrained until bidisciplinary collaboration becomes unremarkable. This, of course, is quite separate from the need to respond jointly to the rape of Africa's artistic heritage.

Let us start at the beginning, with the panels on the first tool use at ca. 2.5 million years B.C.E. and on even earlier hominid finds. Art historians who endorse the "living tradition" approach to inferring the meaning of more ancient art share with archaeologists the problem of interpreting the past by analogy with the present. The problem has the intimidating label of Uniformitarianism. But the basic issues have been debated heatedly in archaeology (among others: Are all behaviors in the past necessarily represented now? If not, how can we recognize, much less interpret, behaviors without present-day counterparts? How can we ever know if the meaning attributed to a symbol, icon, or object has not changed over time, even if the item itself remains unchanged?). Rather than reinvent-